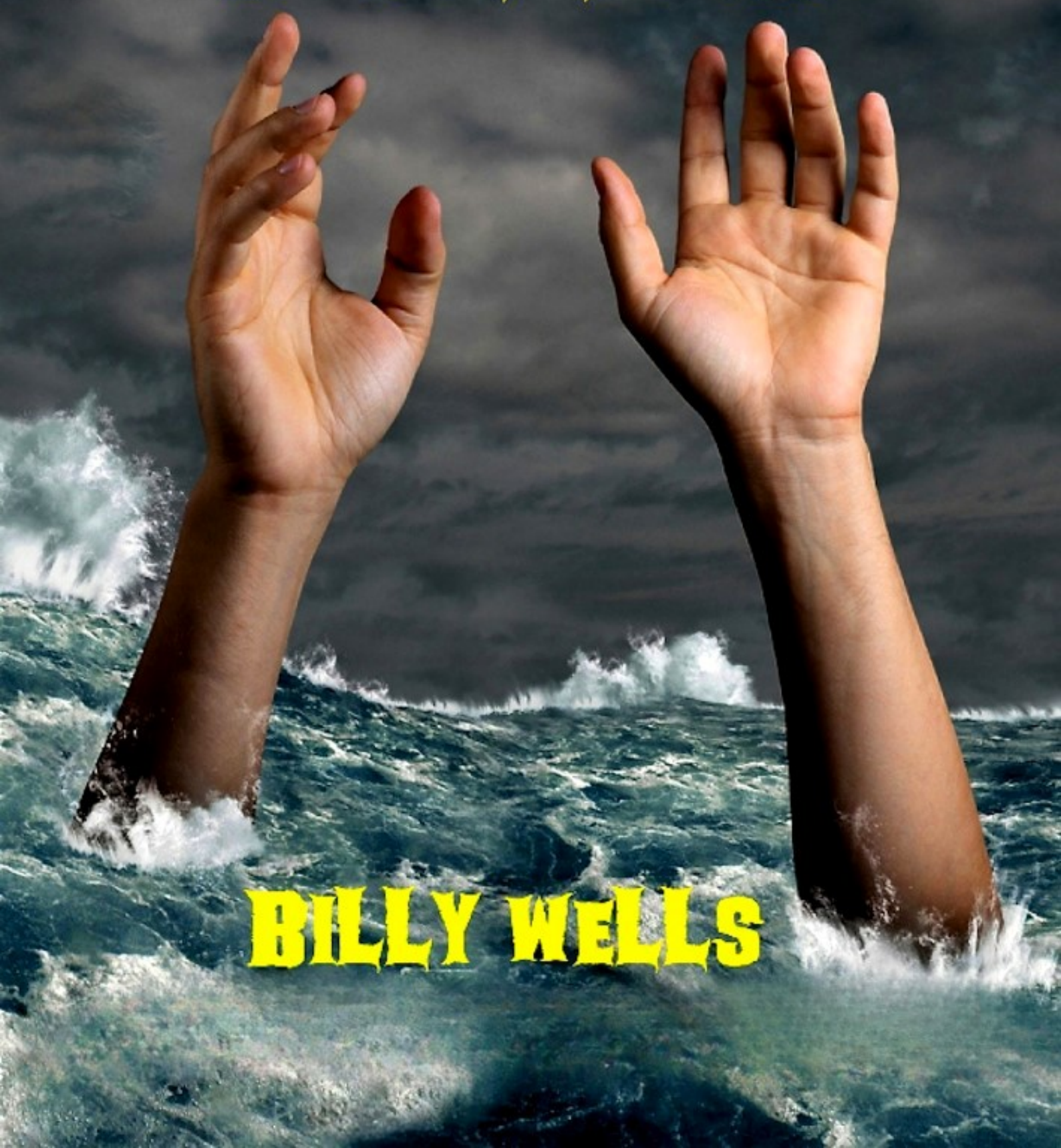


31 TALES OF TERROR
**THRILLERS &
CHILLERS**



BILLY WELLS

Thrillers & Chillers:

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ABOUT BILLY WELLS



Fair Game

Ben Leonard loved to kill people.

Tonight's victim was a stranger waiting for a subway car to Times Square at 10 p.m. He had seen the man reading a newspaper right at the edge of the track at the base of the stairway and knew he would be an easy kill. Several other people were standing here and there along the track, but none of them were near his victim's section of the platform.

He was disguised with a black Beatle-length wig and fake Tom Selleck mustache. He wore a lightweight black jacket over his black pants and shirt.

Just as the train was reaching the spot where the man was standing, Ben jumped from behind the shadowy column and gave him a hard push into the oncoming seven-line train. Since he stood in the protection of the stairway, none of the blood splatter soiled his nondescript black clothes. The deed completed, he bounded up the steps to the street as the train came to a screeching, grisly halt. He wished he could have remained a moment or two longer to get a better look at his handiwork, but he was only able to get a glimpse of the man's head exploding when the train struck him.

Ben was shaking from the excitement of the kill as he moved quickly down the mostly deserted street. About ten blocks from the station, he decided to stop at O'Douls Bar & Grill for a drink to celebrate. He found his way to the bar and sat down. The only patrons were a couple fondling each other in the corner and a man wearing a Yankees baseball cap watching the game on the large-screen TV over the bar.

Wiping the counter, the bartender asked in an Irish brogue, "What'll ye have, Laddie?"

Ben smiled and said, "A very dry Grey Goose martini."

The bartender filled a martini glass with some ice cubes and water.

"Which way to the head?" Ben asked discreetly.

The bartender pointed to the rear of the restaurant, and Ben unbuttoned his light coat and strolled off in that direction.

When he returned, a man in a business suit was sitting one stool away from the seat he had taken when he entered. he was drinking what looked like a gin and tonic. Ben's martini with three olives rested on a napkin with a small bowl of mixed nuts next to it. Ben sat on the stool and took a sip of the martini. replaying the murder in his mind, he grabbed a handful of nuts and ate them. They tasted good. He watched Rivera wind up and throw a fastball that the announcer said was traveling 94 miles an hour.

"You look like you had a hard day," the man in the suit said, giving Ben a warm smile.

Ben wasn't in the mood for conversation, but replied, "I guess you could say that, but after I have another one of these, I'll feel a lot better."

Ben knew that subdued lighting was the preferred ambiance in all NYC watering holes, but this bar was the darkest one he had ever seen. He wondered how a patron could tell if his steak was rare or well done without a flashlight. At least he was confident his wig and fake mustache would not be detected in this dim light.

"I'm Don Lester from Staten Island," the stranger said in shadow. "I just dropped in for a brew before I catch the subway home. I'm an architect, and I work on Third Avenue. What do you do?"

"If I told you what I do, I'd have to kill you," Ben said solemnly.

Don was taken aback by this remark and sat with a shocked expression on his face. After a pause, Ben chuckled and Don finally smiled. "Wow. You looked so menacing for a moment, I thought you might be an ax murderer."

"I assure you I've never used an ax in my work so far."

The two men laughed and sipped on their drinks. Ben ate a handful of mixed nuts and offered the bowl to Don, who passed. They both watched Derek Jeter sliding into home plate ahead of the throw on the TV.

"I can't believe how bad the stock market has been this month," Don said seeing the market statistics pan across the bottom of the screen.

"The economy sucks," Ben agreed. "God knows when we'll come out of it, if we ever do."

Don mumbled some response, but Ben was suddenly deep in thought, surveying the possibilities. He had never killed two people in one day, but he felt the overpowering urge sweep over him. His pulse quickened.

"Don is fair game," he thought. "Just another speck in the gene pool."

"Damn these nuts are good," Ben said, as he felt for the cell phone bomb in his side pocket. He kept it there for just such an occasion. When he saw Don's overcoat draped around the back of the barstool with the right pocket sticking out slightly, he felt his adrenalin kicking in.

A-Rod dove for a hard grounder, scooped it up, and fired to first for the out, just as Don's cell began to ring. When Don pulled the cell from his inside pocket, Ben saw an empty cellophane bag float to the floor. Don turned away and placed his hand over his right ear, while he listened to the caller.

Ben quickly dropped the cell bomb into Don's exposed overcoat pocket. He was sure no one around the bar had seen him. The two in the corner were still fondling each other, and the rest of the patrons had their eyes glued to the baseball game. The score was 2-2 in the bottom of the ninth. He took another pull of his martini and ate some nuts.

Don stowed his cell in his coat pocket and scooped up

the cellophane bag from the floor. As he quickly put on his overcoat, he said, "The boss wants me to stop being a bar fly and get home."

"It was nice to meet you, Don. Maybe we'll see each other again sometime."

Without responding, Don hurried toward the door and disappeared into the street.

Ben waited a few moments, then took out his cell and punched the preset number of the phone he'd placed in Don's overcoat. He smiled with satisfaction when he heard it ring and a slight tremor tinkled the glasses over the bar.

He gestured to the bartender to give him another drink and more nuts while he waited for the newsflash on the TV.

When the bartender put down the second martini and another bowl of nuts, Ben said, "These nuts are wonderful. Is this a trail mix? It seems to have raisins or dates in with the nuts."

"I'm sorry, Laddie. These are just plain Planters peanuts. We don't serve anything else."

Ben looked at the nuts the bartender had just put on the counter and ate a few.

"These aren't the nuts you served before," Ben said as he picked up the first bowl that was still on the counter. He handed it to the bartender, who pulled out a small flashlight and shined it into the bowl. There in the bottom was a mixture of nuts, raisins, dates, and what looked like a dead spider rolled in a tight wad.

"Where did this bowl come from?" the bartender asked with a worried expression on his face.

Ben thought of the cellophane bag and knew the answer. His face contorted in horror as he upchucked a mouthful of black spider parts and trail mix all over the top of the bar. Ben felt very sick and slumped from the barstool onto the floor and started to convulse uncontrollably.

He heard the newsflash about a bomb that killed three pedestrians on Third Avenue. He hoped Don was one of them.

When Jeter homered in the bottom of the tenth, Ben's heart had already stopped beating.



The Eye Of the Beholder

Montague and Isabella sat on a white bench in the park. From the moment he first saw her on that beautiful day only four weeks earlier, he knew he would marry her someday. He felt like a man who'd just won the lottery, because by some miracle, Isabella felt the same way about him. They met every Sunday, rain or shine, at the same place, and each time they talked for hours until Isabella had to catch a bus to go home.

He'd asked to take her out to dinner and offered to take her on trips to exotic places, but she said she had to take care of her sick mother until her sister returned from a sabbatical. Her mother's sisters came to visit on Sunday afternoons, and it was the only time she could get away.

"What will your parents say about you marrying someone like me from the swamps of the bayou?" Isabella asked with her dark eyes fluttering nervously.

Montague smiled warmly and replied, "Once they meet you and see the joy in my heart, they won't let their old fashioned ways stand in the way of my happiness."

Like every Sunday, Isabella rose from the park bench at four o'clock. He embraced her and kissed her tenderly. She

was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen with her sensual body, her long, flowing black hair, her pixie nose, and her mesmerizing blue eyes. Nothing would stop him from spending his life with her. With a deep sadness, he watched her head toward the bus stop. She seemed to float on the air in her white dress like an angel on a cloud.

* * *

“Have you lost your mind? A person of your station can’t marry someone who lives in a falling down shack in the bayou,” Montague’s mother, Bernice, ranted.

“I assure you Isabella does not live in a shack. How did you get that idea?”

“We hired a private investigator. We know every thing about the little tramp,” Montague’s father bellowed.

“Enough of this, I will marry Isabella with or without your approval,” Montague said, as he stormed out the front door.

Montague got into his Maserati and drove away leaving a trail of black rubber on the circular driveway. He couldn’t believe what his parents had told him. Isabella had predicted what they would say, and she was right. In his parents’ way of thinking, the rich must marry the rich. Forget about love and happiness. No wonder his father had a woman who fulfilled his sexual desires in New Orleans. He’d bragged about it several times when his mother wasn’t within earshot. He also believed his father had married for money. He loved his mother, but she looked more like a linebacker for the Saints than a beautiful bride in her wedding pictures, and she was dumber than a barn door.

Montague swore he would never let this happen to him. He loved Isabella and with or without his parents’ fortune, he would find a way to make her happy.

Four days later, Jessup, the butler, loaded four large suitcases into the trunk of a yellow cab. Montague took one last look at the massive estate that covered many acres he’d thought would be his someday. As he was getting into the taxi, Jessup informed him his father had asked for the keys to his red Maserati, and he reluctantly forked them over.

So many sweet memories lingered here in the house

where he was born. He thought of the Christmases and how it took half a day to unwrap his presents. He remembered how he'd cried his eyes out when his mother confessed there was no Easter bunny. A tear rolled down his face as the taxi wound around the circular driveway and passed through the enormous iron gates bordering the estate.

He wondered what kind of job he could find in the current economic crisis. Finding employment had been the last thing on his mind before he met Isabella; now it was a major concern.

When the taxi driver reached the main highway, he asked, "Where to, Mr. Foxworth?"

"The address is 34 Flambeau Road, Empire, Louisiana."

When the location didn't come up on his GPS, he asked, "Are you certain of the address? Do you have a zip code?"

"Yes, that would be 70050."

The driver rechecked the GPS and verified the zip on the monitor. Montague saw him shake his head in puzzlement.

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm flabbergasted that you would be going to that address. There's nothing out there, but a few shacks, alligators, snakes, and swamp."

"You must be mistaken, sir," Montague said indignantly. "My fiancé lives at that address. Did the butler give you adequate payment for the fare?"

"I'll say he did. I can take you to hell and back for the money he gave me. I just didn't know I'd really be going there."

Montague saw the weird smile in the rear view mirror and decided to be quiet.

When the four-lane highway changed to two lanes, the businesses, restaurants, and gas stations became few and far between until they vanished entirely. Water stood on both sides of the road. An occasional alligator slithered into the muck as the taxi continued into the desolate no man's land.

Finally, after another half an hour had elapsed, the driver said, "You're a lucky guy."

"How so?" Montague responded.

"If the butler hadn't greased my palm so well, I would

never have come out here. Think about it. What if my taxi breaks down? I'd be afraid to get out of my car for fear an alligator might gobble me up, or a water moccasin might take a bite out of my ankle. I haven't seen another automobile for a half hour, and this is a dead zone for cell phones."

Montague said nothing, but the miles and miles of swamp on both sides of the road were certainly alarming should anything happen to the taxi.

Finally, the taxi slowed, and Montague saw a dilapidated sign almost covered by a tree limb. The word "Flambeau" was barely visible. Turning onto the sparsely graveled road, the overhanging branches thumped against the windshield as they proceeded deeper into the swamp. When the taxi finally pulled off the shoulder along side a small cottage on the right side of the road, the driver envisioned the Big Bad Wolf outside the house where Little Red Riding Hood came to visit her grandmother.

"Are you sure you want to get out of the car? I'm happy to take you to a decent hotel in the city. I'm going that way anyway."

Suddenly, like a ray of sunshine, Montague saw Isabella, floating like an angel across the green, manicured lawn. She wore his favorite long, white dress. Red roses were nestled in her hair. The moment he saw her, all his fears disappeared. He felt as if he were walking on air. The little cottage with its bright colors stood in front of a huge rainbow in the bluest sky he'd ever seen. Horses romped in the green pastures behind the house, and sheep grazed as far as his eye could see. The birds sang in the oak tree, and the smell of honeysuckle was sweet on the summer wind.

Montague jumped from the taxi and ran to her, lifting her high in the air and smothering her with kisses.

The taxi driver opened the trunk and removed the four suitcases. "Do you need any help with these?" he asked.

"Just leave them there. I'll take them in. Do I owe you anything?"

"I'm more than okay. I got the biggest tip in my life. It'll help put my kids through community college." he chuckled. "One last time, are you sure you're okay?"

“Perfect,” Montague said. “I’ve never been better.”

The driver returned to the taxi, and after fishtailing out of the muck along the shoulder of the road, he finally found traction and pulled away.

* * *

Later that night, after returning to civilization from the swamps, Montague’s taxi driver had some brews with a drinking buddy at their favorite watering hole. After knocking down the first draft and refilling the glass from the large pitcher, he asked his friend, who was also a taxi driver, “Do you believe in witches?”

“Never thought about it. Why do you ask?”

“I think I saw one today.” Montague’s driver popped some peanuts into his mouth from a bowl on the table.

“Where?”

“Out in the swamp about fifty miles into the bayou.”

“What were you doing out there?”

“Believe it or not, someone paid me \$1,000 to take a young fellow and four suitcases from a ritzy estate on Knob Hill to a falling down shack in the swamps. I swear it looked to me like the roof was about to cave in. The front door was hanging by one hinge. The outhouse was leaning so far over someone took the door off so they could get inside to take a crap.”

The good buddy scratched his head, “A thousand dollars! Who would pay so much?”

“The butler of some rich dude whose son was leaving home to move in with his fiancé.”

“Was the young dude blind, deaf, and dumb or just mentally challenged?”

“That’s what I mean when I say I might have seen a witch.”

“What do you mean?”

“This young man must have been under her spell.”

“A spell?”

“Yeah. He thought the house was something out of a fairy tale where they would live happily ever after. He told the woman he saw rainbows and livestock in green pastures in

the backyard instead of the shit storm of derelict cars and junk I saw.”

“She must have been a knockout.”

“On the other hand, she had a grotesque, hairy mole on the tip of her nose and bigger ears than Bugs Bunny. Her mouth was horribly disfigured from a hair lip, and she shambled along like one leg was shorter than the other. Do you remember how Igor, the humpback, walked in *Son of Frankenstein*? It was something like that.”

“Are you sure he wasn’t blind?”

“He wasn’t blind, but he still couldn’t see what was really there.”

“You’re giving me the creeps. Have another brew, and let’s watch the ball game.”

* * *

Two sisters in their seventies, waiting for word on the condition of their 102 year old father at Presbyterian Hospital, noticed Isabella rise from her chair and head toward the ladies’ room.

The elder sister whispered, “Her husband’s parents died in a mysterious fire at their summer home in the Hamptons. The Post said the estate is worth more than six billion dollars.”

“Really. You sure it was billions, not millions?” the younger sister asked.

“I remember specifically it was billions. The front page had a picture of her getting into a Rolls Royce.”

“Did it say what’s wrong with her husband?”

“A team of doctors from all over the country have been working on him for weeks, and so far they don’t have a clue how to save him. An unidentified virus has attacked his organs, and his immune system is too weak to fight it much longer. I overheard one of the doctors say it would be a miracle if he makes it through the night.”

“I had no idea it was that serious.” Pointing to the chair vacated by Isabella, the younger sister whispered, “she doesn’t look like she’s very torn up about her husband’s condition.”

“The caption below the picture of her on the front page

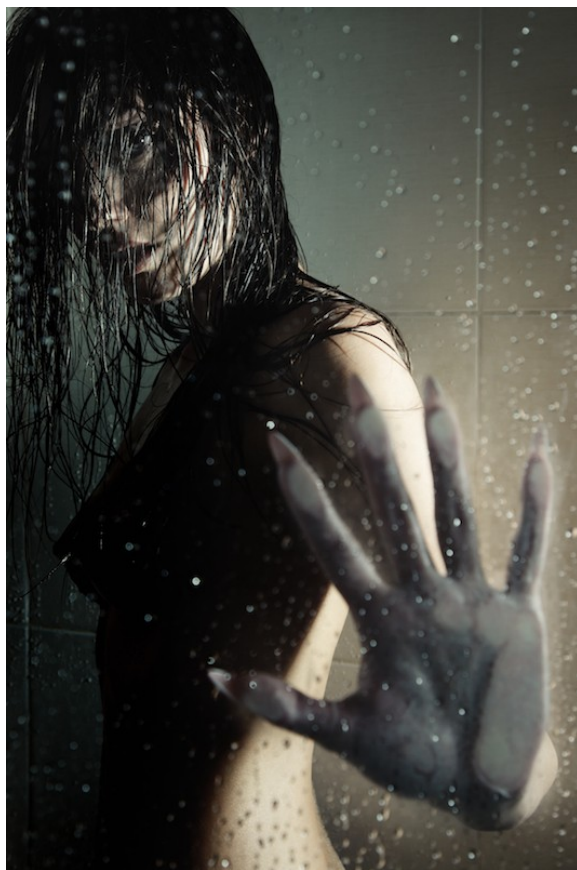
said she'll be the tenth richest woman on the planet if he dies."

"I guess six billion would soften the blow."

"It might even put a little snap in your step on a cold, lonely night."

They chuckled into their crying tissues.

Watching the door to the ladies room, anticipating Isabella's return, the elder sister whispered, "Have you ever seen a woman that ugly?"



Snap

Jennifer awoke from a sound sleep in a strange bed with a lover who was not her husband. Gino, her “Italian Stallion” escort, was still asleep and buried in the covers. She cast a roving eye over Gino’s muscular torso and peeked under the covers to further inspect his masculinity.

She smiled and rose from the bed in a sheer negligee, grabbed a more substantial nightgown from a chair, and began to put it on. She moved to the balcony sliders a bit groggy from the heavy drinking last evening and playfully touched a few of the empty glasses en route.

She pulled the cord at the balcony, and the drapes

parted. An intense ray of sunlight blinded her momentarily. Adjusting to the light, she saw a man with a camera on the balcony across the street snapping pictures of her. She jumped behind the cover of the drapes and pulled her disheveled nightgown about her partially exposed breasts. She found the drawstring and closed the curtains.

“Christ!” she thought. “Here I am a married woman sleeping with a male escort, and some pervert just snapped a picture of me in my birthday suit.”

She extracted a fresh set of underwear from a small suitcase on the floor and made her way to the bathroom. After adjusting the water temperature, she climbed into the tub and let the hot spray run over her for almost forty minutes.

Draped in a white towel, she returned to the suite where her lover had been and started getting dressed. Gino was not in bed. She saw that the balcony door was standing open and the curtains were billowing in the wind.

Fully dressed, she went out on the balcony, but to her surprise, Gino was not there. She looked across the street where the man with the camera had been, and he was gone. She did notice several balconies were full of people looking down. She heard a lot of commotion in the street, and whistles and sirens were screaming. She looked down, and there was Gino, spread-eagled on top of a yellow cab with his masculinity hanging out in all its glory. He was not a pretty site with one side of his face crushed in.

She darted inside. The police were arriving, and a large crowd had formed around the yellow cab. Her only thought was to escape before the police found her room.

She grabbed up her things as quickly as she could and, after surveying the corridor, dashed into the hallway. She took the elevator to the basement level where her car was parked. She rifled through her purse, and while searching for her keys, she discovered her wallet was missing. She knew that she had not removed it from her purse in the room, which meant that someone had taken it. Without any further hesitation, she ran to her car and took off up the ramp that led to the street. The parking exit was not on the street where Gino was sprawled. She saw several police officers directing traffic and

talking to people on the street in the distance.

As she pulled out, she saw the man with the camera standing on the corner. She turned away as fast as she could when he looked in her direction. The camera was in his hand, but she didn't know if he had snapped another picture of her as she sped off toward the Lincoln Tunnel.

Jennifer remembered the incident at the Water Club the previous evening when four men who looked like they were just coming from a tryout for "Godfather IV" had a confrontation with Gino. Gino couldn't take his eyes off their table all night and was cautious not to be followed when he left the restaurant. It was apparent that they must have been followed to the hotel.

"What have I gotten myself into?" she lamented as she veered around a slow mover and almost ran over a jaywalker on Tenth Avenue.

Jennifer assumed that her husband, Harry, was probably also stuck in traffic on his way home to New Jersey via the Lincoln Tunnel. She chewed her fingernails and drummed the steering wheel as the traffic snarled even more as she approached the mouth of the tunnel.

She had told Harry on Saturday that she was attending a business meeting in Chicago for the entire week. She loved Harry dearly, but their lovemaking was almost nonexistent of late, and she craved a little more excitement in her life. One of her wilder friends had suggested the escort service, and after thinking it over for a few months, she had decided to take the plunge.

She extracted the cell from her purse and called home. No answer.

She dialed Harry's cell. He answered on the first ring. "Harry! Harry! Are you home?" "No, I'm stuck in traffic on Route 80." "Don't go home, whatever you do! Someone stole my purse, and it has my credit cards and my address inside."

"Did you call the police?"

"No. I can't do that. I believe these are dangerous people, and

I can't explain now, but we need to meet somewhere and discuss what we are going to do."

"I thought you were in Chicago."

"No, darling. I didn't go after all," Jennifer confessed. "Look, Harry, I am in serious trouble, and I don't know what to do." Jennifer started crying uncontrollably.

"Where are you now?"

"I just went through the Lincoln Tunnel. Let's meet at the Hilton. Go ahead and check in as a...a...Bill Johnson. Pay cash."

The line was silent for a time.

"I know you have questions, but I'll explain when I get there." "Don't worry, Jen. Whatever it is, we'll work it out." Another half an hour passed before she reached the Hilton. Jennifer checked in at the desk and asked for Bill Johnson's room.

"Yes, your husband has already checked into room 512," The desk clerk said and gave her the key to the room as Harry had instructed. "Take the elevator to the fifth floor, turn right. It will be on the right."

Jennifer took the elevator to five and found the room. She took a long breath, swiped the keycard, and entered without knocking.

The suite was much larger than she had expected. There was a wet bar with a high counter where she placed her purse in front of the bathroom. An empty glass of ice was on the countertop, and two little bottles of Bombay Sapphire were next to the glass. She could hear the sound of the shower behind her. The television was on across the room, and the news was just beginning.

"It's show time," she reflected as she tried to prepare the words to explain to Harry what had happened. She surveyed the papers on the bar that faced the TV.

There was a large gray envelop on the top of the bar with photographs partly visible inside. She picked it up and took the photos out and separated them on the desk. Her face drained of color when she saw pictures of Gino and her at the restaurant and the hotel lobby. There were several shots of her standing partially nude at the balcony window and several of her in her car leaving the parking lot. Her wallet was on the top of the bar next to the photos.

Jennifer stood dumbfounded and was trying to connect the pieces of the puzzle, when a picture of her husband filled the TV screen as the news commentator reported, "Harry Fisher, chief executive at the Omar Corporation, went berserk this afternoon and brutally murdered three of his coworkers at his office located at 14 Wall Street."

The shower stopped in the bathroom behind her.

The commentator continued, "Shortly after Fisher's secretary, Miss Ruth Ann Lloyd, and another colleague, Mrs. Karen Verdone, were found dead with their necks broken, Mr. Oswald Bennett, the CEO of Omar, was shot and killed in front of dozens of eyewitnesses when he tried to intervene...."

Jennifer was mesmerized and stood in a state of shock as the videos of Harry's office and his colleagues continued to fill the screen. The bathroom door squeaked as it opened into the room behind her.

Harry placed his hands around Jennifer's neck as the commentator droned on with more details of the office slayings.

Harry's voice resonated in her ear, "Honey, I had a really bad day at the office...."

Snap.



Genie In The Bottle

Jake, Milo, and Brent, who had been roommates at college since they were freshmen, were on their summer break at Virginia Beach. Riding their surfboards with reckless abandon in the 98-degree heat, they were perusing the beach for three foxes to hook up with for their final evening before returning to college for graduation.

“Hey, look! There’s a bottle sealed with a cork!” Milo said, pointing toward the beach.

Brent rushed across the sand into the foamy water and snapped up an ancient blue bottle with a cork in the top. Anxious to find out what was inside, they returned to their umbrellas and plopped down on their blankets.

Brent worked at the cork in the bottle until it finally popped out. All three men heard a loud “Whoosh” and saw purple smoke ooze from the bottle and mysteriously hang before them like a cloud. The three looked in amazement as the purple image finally dissipated into the wind.

“Did you see that?” Milo exclaimed with his mouth agape.

“See what? Purple smoke,” Jake said downplaying the

moment.

"It was as clear as the nose on your face. For a split second, I saw a man in a purple robe wearing a turban."

"No way!" Jake said sarcastically. The genie was in a lamp, not a bottle, for God's sakes."

Milo turned to Brent. "Did you see it? It was so clear."

"I was looking at the parchment I pried from the bottle," Brent said placing two beer cans on two corners to keep it from blowing away. They immediately took note of the old world writing style and the unusually thick paper with edges brittle with age. They discerned an odd medicinal smell lingering in the air.

"It looks like a scroll I saw in an old pirate movie with Errol Flynn," Brent said, then started reading the text aloud, 'Whoever finds this bottle and takes possession of it will be granted one of three wishes from the genie within.'"

They all laughed in unison.

Brent continued. "Read the words carefully and choose wisely. The wish you choose does not come without a price. Once selected, there is no turning back."

"Can you believe this, bullshit?" Jake shouted as he chugged a can of brew.

Brent continued. "Go to a cemetery of your choice and find a tomb with a slab of marble directly above the coffin. At the stroke of midnight, lie prostrate above the corpse within and state your wish aloud. Choose one of the following three wishes:

Live For Today. Ask for this wish, and you will be granted the sum of ten million pounds. In return, you must forsake your family, friends, and all who know you and create a new identity three thousand miles from your current domicile. Any attempt to contact any person from your former life will be punishable with instant death at the hands of the genie who will be with you from this day forward.

Save For Tomorrow. Ask for this wish, and at any time in the future you choose, you will be granted the miracle of eternal life on Earth to live in good health and prosperity and never grow old.

Hereafter. Ask for this wish, and you will forfeit life on

earth and go immediately to heaven where you will spend eternity in a blissful state of happiness and prosperity.”

“Can you believe this ridiculous bullshit?” Jake said sarcastically. “The person who wrote this gibberish has given the genie in his bottle the power to bestow eternal salvation to any nitwit that stumbles across the bottle. That in itself makes the premise preposterous. Who came first? God or the genie?”

“Settle down, dear friend. It really doesn’t matter what you think, Jake,” Brent said with a broad smile across his face. “Milo saw the bottle, and I picked it up and opened it. It’s unclear, which of the two of us the wish belongs to. All that’s certain is you’re out of it.”

Milo nodded in agreement.

“Fellas. Are you really planning to exclude *moi*, your dear roommate and drinking compadre? What happened to all for one and one for all?”

“Milo and I didn’t make the rules, Jake. We can’t split a wish.”

“You guys have lost it. There is no wish. Someone put an old piece of paper in the bottle. It’s a joke, don’t you get it!” Jake ranted.

“I don’t know if the man in the purple robe with the turban can make wishes come true, but I saw him come out of the bottle,” Milo said assertively. “I don’t think this bottle is a joke.”

Looking at Jake, Brent continued. “It’s pointless to keep debating if the scroll is bullshit or whether you are excluded. We’ll all go to a graveyard at midnight and make a wish. The genie can decide who will live happily ever after.”

“My kid brother is dying of leukemia,” Jake whined and buried his face in his hands to keep from laughing. “The doctors say he only has a month to live. If you guys were really my friends, you would let me have the wish to save his life. None of us really needs this wish. We’re going to be doctors and lawyers and live in the lap of luxury all our lives. It’s my little brother who needs the miracle right now.”

His statement hung in the air, and no one said anything, Brent replied, “I’m starving let’s get something to eat and talk

about it some more.”

They gathered up their umbrellas and beach stuff and returned to the hotel. When they reached the room they were sharing, Brent placed the bottle and the note in the safe. Afterward, they went to the bar in the lobby for a few drinks before dinner.

After an hour of serious drinking, they moved to a table and had food and more drinks. For the next two hours, they continued to fantasize about the three wishes. Could a wish be split among them and still satisfy the terms of the scroll?

When the conversation finally wound down, Milo turned to Jake and asked, “I’m surprised you haven’t mentioned your brother before. Is he really dying of leukemia?”

“Actually, no. I made that up. I don’t have a brother.”

Milo and Brent looked at each other and threw up their hands in mock disgust as Jake burst out laughing.

“I can’t believe you. After all the waterholes we’ve closed together, and all the women I’ve hooked you up with,” Brent said shaking his finger at Jake.

Milo continued with the things he’d contributed, “And what about the answers I fed you on your final Physics exam and the bouncer I took on to save your ass at the Rio Grande Casino? Is this the thanks I get? How could you? What a low life.”

“I couldn’t stand for the two of you to live happily ever after without me.” Jake said, trying to catch his breath.

“Let’s end this bullshit once and for all. Let’s get the car.” Brent said, rising to his feet.

The threesome left the restaurant and took the elevator to the parking level. As they piled into the car, Brent said taking the wheel, “Look up the closest cemetery in the GPS.” Jake did the search from the passenger seat, and Milo looked on from the backseat.

In moments, the sound of a sexy woman’s voice issued directions to the nearest cemetery. It was 11:15 p.m. when they pulled up to the gate that surrounded the spooky graveyard.

Checking the exterior wall, they finally found a section of fence with an abnormally wide opening between two

connections. Working at the opening with a tire iron they took from the trunk, they finally struggled through. They proceeded down the path filled with headstones and monuments on both sides.

"I see one like the scroll described," Brent shouted. "I'll make my wish here."

"There's another marble slab here," Milo announced, moving toward it.

Brent and Milo lay down on the cold marble and looked up at a sky full of stars.

After a time, Jake finally announced he had located a similar slab to lie on.

As midnight approached, the three young men lay there in anticipation of making a wish that would change one of their lives forever, or simply be a delightful story to tell their friends for years to come. Jake believed his chances of having his wish come true were less than Brent and Milo, but he hoped for the best.

At the stroke of midnight, the three watches they had synchronized in the car beeped among the headstones.

Brent shouted atop the marble slab, "I wish for number one. Let my future be now. I want to start spending my ten million pounds ASAP.

Milo said, "I wish for number two. I want the miracle of living a healthy, prosperous life on earth forever and never grow old, but I want to be at least twenty-five when I start."

Jake said, "I choose wish number three. I want to sacrifice my time on earth and live in bliss in heaven for all eternity."

At 12:05 a.m., after it appeared nothing had happened, Milo called out, "Brent! Jake! I guess it was a joke after all. He looked across the cemetery to the spot Brent had gone to make his wish and saw nothing. He called out for his two friends again, louder this time, and got no response.

When he arrived at Brent's gravesite, he was nowhere in sight. Milo smiled, but felt his eyes fill with tears as he thought of never seeing Brent again. "I guess you were the lucky one after all. Good luck, old buddy. Jake and I will think about you every time we knock down a brew back home."

Milo called out for Jake, but there was no answer. He began to search the area where he thought his friend had gone to make his wish. Finally, he found Jake's body lying atop a marble slab with a horde of rattlers slithering on and around him. His eyes were wide open, but instead of terror or surprise, he had a peaceful look on his face Milo had never seen before. He knew Jake's father was a Baptist minister, but he had never talked about his personal feelings about faith at all. Had he truly opted to give up life on earth to spend eternity in heaven, or was he simply the unlucky victim of a pack of rattlesnakes? If his wish had been granted, where was Brent?

Milo fought back a flood of emotion as he tried to get his head around the sudden loss for whatever reason of his two best friends. He really didn't know if any of their wishes had been granted when he headed for the place in the fence where they had entered the cemetery. Reaching the parking lot, he saw the rental car. A dejected look came over him when he remembered Brent had the keys. Then a smile replaced the frown when he remembered the door had both a numerical entry and ignition pad. He punched in the five numbers the salesman had given them when they leased the car and heard the automatic locks open.

As he got behind the wheel, the passenger door opened, and a surly man in a checkered shirt and blue jeans slid into the seat, pointing a sawed off shotgun in his face. Two other unsavory men piled into the back seat. Milo smelled the unpleasant odor of beer, smoke, and sweat fill the interior of the car.

The man with the shotgun said, "We're gonna take a little ride to the friendly ATM and see how much cash we can get on your credit cards. If you do what we say, we'll just tie you up, take the car, and be on our way. You look like a college boy with a bright future. What's a few Benjamin's and a rental car to an up and comer like you?"

"We can't let him live," a voice from the back seat blurted. "He'll call the cops."

"Shut your face, moron. Let me do the talking."

The man with the shotgun turned back to Milo, "My

friend in the back is not too bright. Believe me, we mean you no harm. We don't want to kill you and spend the rest of our days behind bars. I promise you on my mother's grave, give us the cash, and you can have your life back." He gave Milo the solemn look of a preacher and gestured for him to drive.

Pulling on to the interstate, Milo heard the two men in the back snickering to themselves. The man with the shotgun turned on the radio, and punching the channel select buttons found Kenny Rogers singing, "You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em." Milo knew the man was lying, but with a shotgun in his ribs, had no choice, but to follow his orders for now.

"Take the next ramp, and turn left," the man with the shotgun ordered. "There's a rest stop in the Virginia Visitor's Center." Milo took the exit and followed the signs toward the center.

Abruptly, the radio announcer interrupted Kenny with late breaking news, "Three men have escaped from the maximum security prison at Norfolk. They are armed and dangerous and are believed to have killed three prison guards."

"I'm sorry you had to hear that," the man with the shotgun said, turning off the radio.

"I am, too," Milo responded, grabbing the shotgun and turning the muzzle toward the roof of the car as he floored the accelerator. The shotgun blast shattered the windshield into a million pieces as the car fishtailed downward toward the guardrails surrounding the overlook. The car exploded through the metal barriers like cheesecloth and for a moment looked like an airplane as it lifted off the ground and hurtled down the mountainside.

The first impact into a stand of pine trees inflated the airbags. The two men in the back seat flew forward like missiles and collided with the man who had the shotgun and broke his neck. When the airbags deflated, all three prisoners were thrown through the open windshield like puppets when the front of the car sideswiped a pile of rocks. Milo, unlike the other three men, was wearing his seatbelt and remained in the car as it rolled down the mountain and finally hit a massive

boulder dead center and burst into flame.

* * *

Looking at the state of the car, it's a miracle you're alive and a double miracle you didn't break every bone in your body," the doctor said as he shined a bright light into the young man's eyes who'd just cheated death and found everything normal.

Milo smiled, but didn't try to explain how he'd managed to escape without a scratch from the mangled wreckage that continued to burn even now. The doctor and the police assumed he'd been thrown from the car before the explosion.

Faced with certain death at the hands of the escaped convicts, he'd taken the leap of faith and asked for his wish to start a split second before the car hit the boulder and became a fireball. From that moment forward, he was indestructible.

He wondered what it would be like to live forever and never grow old. The scroll said that all three wishes came with a price. He thought of Brent and Jake and hoped they were happy wherever they were.



Dominance

Every summer for five years, the Simmons family had gone camping the last two weeks of August in the Adirondacks. The father, James, was a stockbroker on Wall Street, who loved to get away from the Manhattan rat race. It was a ritual his father had also loved, and he continued it with his family. His wife, Emily, an interior decorator on Park Avenue had never experienced going into the wild with her parents. Nonetheless, she too couldn't wait to leave her impossible deadlines and long hours in the Big Apple to spend quality time with her husband and her twelve-year son, Timmy, before school started again for another year.

She assumed most families went to Disney World or the beach for their summer vacations, but the call of the forest was magical to them, and they looked forward to their camping trip every year.

Timmy was an unusually timid boy with bushy blond hair who looked much younger than his age. He was exceptionally smart and got good grades, but being rail thin caused him to be picked on mercilessly by the bullies at the middle school. He wasn't coordinated enough for baseball and football, but he'd become one of the fastest boys in the conference on the track team, particularly on long-distance races. Timmy had learned to swim when he was five, and planned to sign up for the swim team as soon as he was old enough.

The first day in the forest had been exhausting. They had hiked about 10 miles, and they looked forward to roasting hot dogs around the campfire that evening.

After dinner, they heard an owl hooting nearby. They felt a slight chill in the air, despite the blazing campfire. James eagerly leafed through a book of scary stories trying to find a decent one to read before bedtime.

Not finding a worthy story in the book, James decided he'd tell a tale he'd heard on his first camping trip to the Shenandoah Valley. He made an eerie sound to set the mood and began, "Two teenagers found a secluded place to park at the end of a spooky road. In a cornfield bordering a beautiful lake, the moon hung over a scarecrow, and the wind quivered its limp arms and cried among the trees."

He paused, and turning to Emily asked, "Do you think this story is too scary for Timmy?"

Timmy answered immediately, "Dad, this story is like Disney compared to the movies my friends and I have seen. We saw *Halloween I and II*, *30 Days Of Night*, and *Dawn of the Dead* to name a few. Come on, don't spoil the fun."

Emily nodded, and James continued, "They were solving mysteries without any clues," he said, winking at Emily, "when the radio announcer broke into the song playing on the radio and said, 'A madman named Luther Gross has broken out of an insane asylum near Lonesome Lake, and the police are combing the area. If you are in that proximity, go home and lock your doors, particularly if you are camping in the Adirondacks.'"

James snickered at the two of them and continued in the voice of a radio announcer, "Gross is extremely dangerous

and has a hook for his right hand. He murdered two guards in his escape.” James continued in his normal voice, “Frightened out of her wits by the news, and knowing they had parked in a spot with a view of the lake, the girl told her date to take her home. Extremely disappointed, he didn’t want to leave and tried to convince her it was a one in a million shot that Gross was lurking nearby. The girl started screaming and demanded he take her home. Her date was so mad, he floored the accelerator, peeled rubber as he pulled onto the asphalt, and fishtailed down the lonely road.”

A log in the fireplace popped, and they all jumped. A plaintive cry of an animal wailed in the distance. Their eyes darted about the branches that were rustling eerily on the night wind.

James continued, “When the teenager pulled up at his date’s house, he apologized for his behavior. They kissed, and when he went around to open her door, he saw the bloody hook dangling from the door handle.” Jim made another eerie sound, and they all laughed to dispel the fear the story had aroused in their psyches.

They talked for a while, but an uneasy feeling remained. Despite the conversation, the story had affected Timmy more than any movie he’d ever watched on TV, even when he was alone in the house with the lights out. The woods with all the animal sounds and the complete darkness beyond the campfire made a scary story much more terrifying than hearing it at home. He knew, when they doused the campfire at bedtime, it would be pitch black in the woods. Not only was there no moon or stars in the cloudy sky; there were no streetlights or lights in adjoining houses. No headlights passing on the highway. This was like being in a cave without a flashlight. Feeling unsettled, he waited with anticipation for morning.

James could see the story and the creepy darkness had unnerved his son, so he went to the SUV and turned on the radio to break the silence.

They had all made a pact not to bring their computers or video games on these trips, but they had inadvertently forgotten their iPods, as well. To liven up the evening, James

found a station playing golden oldies. Timmy winced at this selection but held his tongue. It wouldn't be easy, but he thought he could make it a few weeks without rap.

The sound of "No Time" by Guess Who dispelled the visions of ax murderers from their minds as the three of them recalled some of the good times from previous holidays.

Just when their nerves had settled, the radio announcer's voice cut into a riff from "My Sharona," "This is an important news flash. Charles Pope, a mass murderer and pedophile, has escaped from Ray Brook Prison located between Saranac Lake and Lake Placid. He was awaiting execution in connection with the brutal deaths of ten families who were camping in the Adirondack Mountain Range from 1990 through 2002. Extensive tattooing and plastic surgery have caused him to look like a devil. He has a red face, red, pointed ears, and small black horns implanted on his head. If you are camping in this area, leave immediately."

"My Sharona" continued.

Looking at each other, they peered into the blackness surrounding the campfire.

James shouted, "Grab what you can and throw it into the back of the SUV." He doused the fire with coffee, turned on the headlights, and turned off the radio. Janet grabbed her sleeping bag and various items strewn about the camp. James took down the tent in record time and tossed it in a heap into the vehicle. Timmy stowed the remaining camping supplies in the trunk, climbed into a bucket seat, and fastened his seat belt.

"Oh my God!" Timmy screamed, seeing a mountain of a man strike his father in the head with a long blade in the headlights. Blood sprayed across the windshield as he struck his father a second time. Afterward, he lifted his mother off the ground and slammed her across the hood of the SUV. He heard the gut wrenching sound of bones breaking as the monster battered her against a pine tree and then let her twisted body crumple to the ground.

Timmy quickly locked the doors, then looked out in horror as the devil glared ferociously through the side window at him. Frozen in terror, he watched the madman lick the

glass in front of his face with a long tongue with curled, split ends.

Timmy continued screaming and sobbing as the monster returned to his parents and hoisted them up on the limbs of two trees with a rope. Both hung with their arms suspended just above the ground. Blood ran from their wounds, pooling on the dirt below them. The devil turned and bounded toward him with a maniacal, depraved grin on his face. Unlocking the car door with the keys he'd taken from his father, Timmy felt the grip of his steel fingers biting into his shoulders as he dragged him into the front seat. The devil bound his arms and head so he couldn't move from the forward position facing his mother and father dangling from the trees in the headlights. The devil climbed into the driver's seat and said with saliva running down his scarlet chin, "The show will start shortly. We don't want to miss it."

Timmy struggled in his seat, but his bonds were too tight for him to escape or even to move his head. With his mouth gagged, he could no longer scream.

Blood covered his father's face, but the one eye still open kept searching for Timmy in the SUV. Even with her body convulsing uncontrollably, his mother kept struggling to see what the killer was doing with her son.

The fiendish eyes of the devil grew wider with excitement when a black bear sauntered in from the forest. The boy's father's body dangled enticingly before him like a slab of raw, bloody meat. After one swipe of the beast's massive claws and one blood-curdling scream, the bear began to devour his father right before his eyes in the blinding clarity of the headlights. The devil man's breath reminded him of death and decay. When he yanked the tape from Timmy's mouth, he wretched uncontrollably and vomit sprayed across his pants and shirt.

"I wish we had some popcorn, son," the devil remarked gleefully. "This is the most fun I've had since I pushed my mother into a rotor at the chicken plant when I was sixteen." Unable to control himself, he began to laugh hysterically.

The bear was licking his chops when they heard the sound of wolves in the distance. Timmy saw the terror in his

mother's face as they approached in a flurry. He closed his eyes as the pack ravaged the person he loved more than anyone on earth. He had never thought of death at his young age, but he prayed for it now with all his might. His parents were dead, and he was in the clutches of a human monster with the face of the devil.

In the headlights, the gory remains glistened in the high beams. The sound of police sirens whined in the distance as the devil threw Timmy over his shoulder like a sack of grain and disappeared into the underbrush. The maniac had lived in these woods all his life and knew a lot of places to hide. The police would never find him. He was sure of that.

Fallen rock protected the entrance to the devil's lair, situated under the base of a cliff at the edge of the lake. He had to swim with the boy underwater to enter. Weeks passed, and the devil did with the boy as he pleased. The police had never suspected an underwater access to his hideout, and the dogs could not pick up his scent in the water cave. Helicopters and teams of men on foot with their Dobermans had been combing the forest since his escape. They'd found the remains of the Simmons couple and their SUV, but no trace of their son or the serial killer. The appalling details by the media of Pope's latest victims and pictures of the devil's face on every front page across the nation fueled public frenzy.

The boy prayed for death each day as he lie spread eagled on a soiled mattress. He could be lifted up or down or flipped over like a human pancake on a bed of ropes at the whim of the monster. He tried to starve himself, but tortures concocted by the madman forced him to eat.

After a year, the search parties abandoned the search and other families returned to the campgrounds, which caused the monster to seek new blood and new meat for his carnal pleasures.

Another family had disappeared without a trace, but because their Adirondack camping trip was a spur of the moment outing none of their friends had known about, the region had been omitted from the manhunt. The devil had covered up the brutal murder of the parents and had imprisoned a new, young teenager in a second cell in the

cave.

After a time with two boys imprisoned in the cave, the devil released Timmy from his bonds and allowed him to build up his strength in the daylight above ground by means of a long cable strapped to his ankle. He tried to escape several times, but the devil seemed to enjoy finding him and beating him unmercifully each time he wandered from the path. He heard the other boy screaming in the deep recesses of the cave at different times on certain days, but had never seen him.

The devil was a hunter, and after he tired of a victim, he would release him into the forest and track him with a bow. He had successfully killed every young captive he'd released. No hunt ever lasted more than half a day. His goal was to wound his prey in order to find additional pleasure in torturing them until they finally found eternal peace in death.

Early one morning, after a venison and duck egg breakfast, the devil took Timmy to a clearing, "You've got a one hour head start, boy. At eight o'clock, I'll be coming for you with my bow. So far, no one has lasted more than twelve hours. I only want to cripple you with the first shot. Don't think our intimate relationship the past year will cause me to pull any punches. I plan to make you wish you were dead long before the sun comes up tomorrow. I'm almost creaming my jeans right now just thinking about it."

Timmy looked into the stone cold eyes of the devil and swallowed hard as he moved into the underbrush and disappeared. Before bolting into a run, he climbed a pine tree, and ripping off a strip of his shirt, he wrapped it around a limb twelve feet off the ground. Dropping back to the ground, he took off in the direction the sun was rising. Burying the remainder of his red shirt in some leaves, he covered his chest and back with patches of mud he found along the way. He'd learned a few valuable things in the Boy Scouts about surviving in the woods.

It had been months since he'd run, and the long imprisonment in the cave had weakened him considerably. Nonetheless, he could feel the adrenalin kicking in as he sprinted into the forest. He'd been one of the best long

distance runners in the state for his age. He could cover a lot of ground if he could only find a break in the dense terrain. His greatest fear was running in circles rather than traveling in a straight line out of the state park.

The sun was going down when he found shelter in a recess of a cliff overlooking a fast moving river. It had been in the eighties during the day, but now the temperature was falling. He heard the frightening sound of wolves howling in the distance.

In no time, pitch-blackness enveloped the forest just as it did that last night he'd spent with his parents. A cloud covered the moon and stars. He knew the devil couldn't run as fast as he could, but he might know shortcuts to shorten the distance. Perhaps he had night goggles or other devices to help track him during the night. He was a formidable adversary, and Timmy was on the alert as the night softened and the sun began to break on the horizon.

When he came from the mouth of the recess and saw the new day before him, he was proud he'd survived longer than the previous victims. He was miles away from where he'd started and was fairly certain he would run into the state highway sometime during the day. The recess he'd chosen was at a dead end at the end of a path on the rock face. In order to continue to freedom, he had to backtrack a few hundred feet. It was then he saw the devil approaching at a steady pace, closing off his escape route.

"I must say, boy, you're quite a runner. You must have been on a track team somewhere, but now you've boxed yourself in. You've got nowhere to go on that ledge. Your ass is mine." The devil grinned with fiendish satisfaction, extracting an arrow from his sheath.

Timmy looked down at the turbulent river, which he guessed was thirty feet below him, and knew it was his only chance. Better to break his neck or drown than to be tortured by the monster with the tattooed face. Seeing the look in Timmy's eyes, he loaded an arrow in the crossbow and let it fly. The arrow sliced through Timmy's left ear as he hurtled into space and plunged into the river below. He started swimming with all his might. The devil could not get a clear

shot at him because of the terrain along the shore. By the time he reached a place for a good shot, the water had swept the boy far down stream.

Being an extremely good swimmer, he moved through the bitter cold water like the devil was after him. Reaching the opposite shore after what seemed like an eternity, he eventually found the state road only three miles away. The devil looked across the panorama of the landscape, cursing the only boy who had somehow found the stamina and endurance to escape his clutches and survive.

* * *

Six years later, Tim Simmons, was eighteen. He was no longer the skinny waif he'd been when he was in the devil's clutches. He had molded his body into a muscular Adonis. He stood six feet six, could bench press 300 pounds, and had earned a division one scholarship as an all-state offensive linebacker. He was also a championship swimmer and a gold metal long distance runner.

His mother's parents had raised him after his ordeal in the Adirondacks. The horrific memories of the monster continued to haunt him day and night. Frequently, he had nightmares of the wild animals ravaging his parents, and the man with the red devil face who had come to him so many times to do unspeakable things.

He was no longer the mild mannered little boy who had gone on the camping trip with his parents when he was twelve, but someone capable of entering the Strongest Man contest. In addition to his incredible strength, stamina, and iron will to win; he had also trained to be deadly with a bow and various firearms.

The time had come to put it all on the line and hunt down the devil still lurking in the Adirondacks. The monster had eluded police dragnets and swat teams for more than six years. His hideout had never been found. Each summer, a few more campers disappeared, but this was customary even before the devil set foot in the mountain range. There was no definitive evidence the monster was still at large.

Tim told his grandparents he'd landed a summer job in

Connecticut that was too good to pass up. He planned to rent a cheap apartment until college started in September. They hated to see him go, but wished him well. He assured them he would stay in touch, and they could always call him on his cell.

Driving on I-87 north in his Highlander, he picked up Route 9N to the primitive camping area.

In their quest to avoid loud radios, raucous behavior, or fellowshiping with other campers, Tim's parents had always chosen sites far away from the general population. Tim drove deeper and deeper into the forest until everyone else had disappeared.

Finally, he found the campsite where the devil butchered his parents. There was no doubt in his mind; this was the spot they had always chosen to camp. A tear rolled down his cheek as he withdrew his backpack from the floor, then sorted the items on the seat. He pulled out a tent from the trunk and, driving pins into the ground, erected it in a matter of minutes. He placed a sleeping bag on the floor inside. Taking a Glock from the glove box, he placed it behind his belt at his back and left his belongings in the car.

He wasn't sure of the direction of the devil's hideout, but he didn't think it was far away. Focusing his eyes upward on the pine trees in the area, he hoped the shred of the red shirt he'd left might still be there.

An hour later, he saw the faded red cloth wrapped around a small limb. A minute later, he spotted the rock face and heard the familiar roar of water and headed in that direction. He'd been blindfolded when the devil took him to and from the entrance to the mine. All he could remember was putting his hand on a large boulder near the water line. Following the shore until he saw it, he dove into the water and swam twenty feet underwater until he found the recess into the cliff. With no effort, he emerged from the water and lifted himself onto the ledge.

A coal oil lantern illuminated the rock wall inside. He saw other lights flickering deeper in the cave. A child's plaintive cry echoed from within. The horror of the past flooded his senses, but it was not the right time to confront the devil. Returning to the shore, he hid behind a fallen tree to

wait for him.

It was late afternoon when Tim heard the sound of someone emerging from the water. He peered through the branches of the tree and saw the monster surveying the area. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he started down the path toward the old campsite.

The arc of the stun gun hit the devil in the back of the head, which sent him toppling to the ground. Tim pulled ropes from his backpack and after binding him securely, placed him on a stretcher made from two limbs and some cloth. Tim dragged him back to the campsite where he'd parked his car. Throwing two chains over a stout tree limb, he hoisted him into a standing position atop an anthill he'd spotted when he set up his tent.

Adrenalin raced through his veins like a raging river. He couldn't wait to mete out the most horrific pain imaginable on the loathsome monster to quench his insatiable lust for revenge. He recognized the same tree where his father had hung when the black bear had mauled him. Tim's eyes were ablaze with unmitigated hatred. He drove two stakes into the ground and secured his captive's feet so he couldn't move them.

He went to the Highlander and drove it from its parking place to a spot in front of the devil's motionless body.

Ripping off the devil's clothes, Tim extracted a plastic bottle of honey from his backpack and poured it into the monster's eyes, ears, mouth, and genitals. He pulled out a bowie knife and sliced through several veins on his arms and legs. Blood started to pool at the devil's feet as flies and other insects began swarming over his sweet, sticky flesh.

Returning to the Highlander, Tim pulled out a bag of popcorn and two cold beers from a cooler and started to snack. The devil awoke from his unconscious state and surveyed his precarious situation. He saw the flies and knew they were laying eggs that would become maggots if he couldn't free himself.

Tim opened the sunroof, and standing on the seat, emerged through the roof and began to roar with laughter.

The devil glared at Tim in disbelief and screamed, "Who

are you?" Several wasps circled his head.

"I'm your worst nightmare," Tim said proudly. "The boy who escaped six years ago."

"I knew you'd be back for me, but I didn't think you'd be so ugly," the devil boomed in defiance. A trail of ants crawled up both legs from a swarm on the ground.

"I'm happy you still have a sense of humor. You're going to need it."

"Is this the best you can do?" the devil grunted through clenched teeth.

They heard a growl in the distance and the sound of thrashing behind the trees.

The murderer of his parents was shivering in agony as the sun started to disappear on the horizon. Tim turned on the headlights. By now, flies and buzzing insects covered the devil's torso. Streams of ants had created black patches over his eyes. His teeth were chattering uncontrollably as he writhed to free himself.

Sitting back down, Tim resumed snacking on his popcorn. It wasn't long before the wolves started howling in the distance. He could see their yellow eyes glowing in the black forest beyond the headlights. In no time, the pack sprang from the trees and began to ravage the hanging devil man. His lone scream died abruptly as a huge grey wolf ripped out his throat and vocal chords. Blood and guts splattered in all directions as the gnashing teeth tore at him until there was nothing left but a pile of bloody bones.

Tim thoroughly enjoyed watching the ravenous predators devour the unspeakable monster, but the punishment seemed too short considering the unspeakable acts he'd committed. He'd waited six years for this moment. After finishing his popcorn and the second beer, he blared on the horn until the wolves scrambled back into the woods.

At last, he'd gotten his revenge after so many years of preparation. In addition to the brutality he had meted out, he found comfort knowing the devil would certainly burn in hell for all eternity.

Pulling a miniature bottle of Jose Cuervo from his backpack, he chugged it. Tim knew there was a young boy in

the cave; he'd heard him crying when he'd found the hidden entrance. With a lot of thinking to do, he didn't want the boy's company tonight. There would be time for him tomorrow.

In the morning, Tim left the Highlander and returned to the underwater hideout. He called out into the cave, and after a time, the boy answered him. He continued down the path until he came to the cage where he'd lived for what seemed like a lifetime. He shuddered when he saw the contraption that could be raised or lowered to accommodate the devil's pleasure each day. The fiendish monster had violated his innocence in this hellish place so many times. Somehow the devil had not only taken his parents away but had spawned another monster like himself. Tim loathed what he had become.

He found the boy in a wooden cage, sitting on a soiled mattress. His face was dirty and his clothes tattered. Looking as if he'd been to hell and back, he continued to sob and kept glaring at Tim suspiciously. After searching the surroundings, Tim found a key on a spike, which fit the lock on the cage. Unlocking it, he said, "The devil is dead. You're safe. You're going home at last."

The boy put his head on Tim's chest and kept sobbing. Tim placed his hand on his back and tried to comfort him. Touching the young boy sent an unwelcome tremor into his loins. He tried with all his might to control his feelings, but an erection swelled in his pants. Removing his hand from the boy, he waited for the feeling to subside. Afterward, he led the boy to the water and swam with him the short distance to shore.

Returning to the van, Tim drove to the nearest service center and called 911.

When the police arrived, they took custody of the boy, who was still in a state of shock. Tim told the police he'd found him wandering in the woods. Since he was a hero for rescuing the lost boy, the authorities did not press him in the matter any further. They advised him he was free to go.

Tim sat in a chair in the lobby of the service center and noticed several families preparing to go camping. Watching three little boys laughing and playing with a rubber ball, he

looked at them with hungry eyes.

Disgusted with himself, he went to the Highlander and got in. Raindrops pelted the windshield as he removed the Glock from his backpack. The time had come. He placed the barrel in his mouth with a live round in the chamber. His hand was hot and sweaty, but the cold steel on his tongue sent shivers up his spine. He was eighteen with all his dreams and aspirations waiting for him in the city. He saw a male Adonis when he looked in the rear view mirror.

He thought about the feelings he had for the three little boys in the service center and pulled the trigger.



House Of The Phantom

The house of a mass murderer was beyond the gate. Dozens of police cars and three helicopters surrounded the property with floodlights illuminating the grounds like it was broad daylight. Inside, the fiend known in the papers as the “Phantom” waited to take out as many police officers as he could before succumbing to their assault. He’d vowed not to be taken alive.

His warped mind had created a human vampire. Six of his victims were found slaughtered on the back streets of Chicago. All bore the signature he was famous for, the severed jugular vein, and the absence of blood in the body.

The seventh victim had eluded the madman’s attack, providing the authorities with the only description they’d had to

date since all the other victims were dead.

“When I took the call,” Frank Slaughter, homicide detective said, “I thought the caller had to be a prankster at first. When he said his attacker was a masked man in a long black cape wielding a long knife that glowed in the dark, I almost laughed out loud. But when he gave me his name and address and I found it was valid, I knew it wasn’t a prank call.”

The investigation headed into high gear when twenty minutes later, two policemen heard a woman screaming in an alley and came to her rescue. Seeing the mask and the long knife they had just heard described on the two-way, they opened fire to save the lady. One of the officers believed one of the shots had found its mark, and although the Phantom escaped, he thought the perp was badly wounded. They followed the trail of blood to the house and called for back up.

Mike Smith said to his partner, “Well, Frank, it looks like we’ve got the nod to take the front door. The others are going to cover the back door and the perimeter.”

“I really get tired of us being selected as the martyrs of the precinct. One of these days our luck is going to run out and this could be it.” Frank looked at his shield and wondered who in their right mind would go into this house.

Step by step, the two detectives edged closer to the front door under cover of the high shrubbery that grew along the left side of the sidewalk. Every shadow seemed alive, and they knew each breath could be their last. Remaining silent, they listened for the slightest sound of movement as they approached. Another officer with a battering ram appeared from the right, and bounded toward the entrance. With one swoop, he splintered the hinge, knocking the door inward onto the floor. The officer bolted from the gaping blackness of the doorway and took cover. Slaughter and Smith with pistols at the ready, burst into the foyer and took a crouching position to the left and right of the door.

Across the room, they saw the outline of the pale, corpse-like face of someone sitting in a tall chair shrouded in a black cloak. The figure they assumed was the Phantom did not move an inch, but sat staring at them. Slaughter shimmied forward on his stomach and aimed his gun at the death mask

with the crocodile smile.

Suddenly a steel panel slid in behind Slaughter and Smith and isolated them from the other officers who had taken a position at the entrance. Their hearts pounded faster and faster as their companions started an assault on the steel panel with the battering ram. Their effort was useless. Waiting for the worst scenario, the two detectives kept their firearms pointed directly at the Phantom and ordered the maniac to open the panel or they would fire. He remained motionless. His eyes glowed red in their sockets. He began to laugh hysterically.

Looking around Frank said to his partner. "All the windows are barred from within. This place is like a fortress. We're on our own, so don't worry about taking any prisoners or reading the Phantom his rights."

Again Frank threatened the pale figure in the chair with surrender or die, to no avail. Suddenly the Phantom's head lifted off his body and floated across the room toward the two officers. Three shots rang out, piercing the haggard skull and sending it to the floor. A weird laugh echoed through the corridors of the black interior.

Suddenly, the floor disappeared beneath Slaughter, and he fell into a four-sided enclosure with stonewalls on all sides that were positioned below the floor. Two of the walls were lined with rows of stainless steel edges as sharp as a razor. Smith had disappeared on the other side of the wall. He could hear him screaming. The insane laughter grew louder and louder. The walls of the stone enclosure started to move inward on Slaughter like the jaws of a vice. The roar of an engine whined from under the floor. Through the top of the enclosure that remained open, the skull-like head of the phantom loomed above.

Slaughter aimed his flashlight across the ceiling and unleashed a few bursts of gunfire at the head, which exploded and fell into the trap. Slaughter saw a wire attached to the skull and pulled on it. After taking up the slack, he found it still attached somewhere above. He took hold of the wire and with all his strength lifted himself to the top of the walls that were closing in on him. He heaved a sigh of relief as he reached

the top of the wall and looked around for his partner.

From this vantage point, he saw another enclosure below him filled with water. His partner's body was floating face down with his eyes open.

Slaughter slid from the top of the wall into the black room below. The only sound was the beating of his heart. He thought of his long time partner. All he wanted was a chance to get even. He heard a series of thumps behind him. Turning around, he aimed his flashlight and his gun into the blackness.

Dangling from the ceiling, he saw three heads of officers he recognized that had apparently been decapitated by the Phantom. Behind the heads, he saw the devilish grin of the maniac and the glint of the stainless steel knife glowing in the dark. He opened fire as the black shape advanced toward him wielding something that looked like a machete. He felt the cold blade slash his chest and the warm blood flowing down his side. The face of the Phantom met his own in the dark, and he blacked out.

When Slaughter became conscious, the EMT's were working on his chest wound.

"What happened to the Phantom?" asked Slaughter, wincing in pain.

An officer aimed his flashlight at the floor. A hand protruded from the top of the trap Slaughter had escaped from. Apparently, the Phantom had fallen into his own trap and was unable to escape before the blades devoured him.

Slaughter thought of Smith and was sorry he wouldn't be there when they gathered at Joe's Pub to celebrate the end of the Phantom's reign of terror on the city. Then he remembered he wouldn't be there either as the EMT's lifted him on to a stretcher and wielded him into the ambulance.

His head was spinning with medication as he wondered what they could have done differently to avoid the Phantom's insidious traps. As the ambulance pulled slowly away, Slaughter caught a glimpse of a death's head in a window on the second floor of the house. He lifted his head, straining to get a better look. He assumed it was just another skull mask affixed to the window until it winked at him and waved goodbye.

The phantom was never heard from again, but Slaughter always wondered who was in the meat grinder.



The Initiation

A van of six fraternity brothers pulled up to a tall wooden fence, approximately ten feet high, located in a remote section of the Fort Belvoir Army Base. The night of the long-awaited initiation of the plebes into the Alpha Phi Omega fraternity had finally arrived. Jerry's watch read 8:45 p.m. as he climbed

down from the van that was hidden just around the bend from the entrance of the compound and was shielded from view by heavy terrain.

Jerry looked at the others with a shit-eating grin on his face and said, "This is the best idea we've ever had. This will be a night to remember. A hell night to top all hell nights!"

Charlie chuckled at Jerry's remarks as he uplinked the professional night cameras he'd rented to record the event for fraternity posterity. "This place is perfect. It's scary enough to give Dracula nightmares," he said slamming the trunk lid. "And look at that sky. Those clouds look extremely creepy. It's like a big wave coming at us."

"This terrain reminds me of the Sleepy Hollow flick," Harry put in. "Look at those gnarled trees, and the fog is getting thicker. Christ!"

"Do you hear hoof beats?" Jerry said in his scariest voice.

"Do unto others like what was done unto us last year," Ben mused.

"Right on! Only ten times worse if we play our cards right," Sam said gleefully. "It's payback time in the old woods tonight."

"Thank God we didn't do the haunted house routine this year. We've been to the old mental hospital one too many times!" Jerry exclaimed.

Sean extracted the ladder from inside the van and propped it against the wall, and one by one, the frats climbed the wall of the compound and descended to the ground on the other side. The new recruits were to arrive shortly, and five of the six early birds needed to find their places in the bushes to prepare for the insidious pranks they had devised for hell night over the past few weeks. Ben handed the newly painted metal sign they had brought with them down to Walt, who leaned it against a stump adjacent to the entrance where the recruits were certain to see it. The sign was shiny and white with big red letters that read, "BEWARE! This area patrolled by vicious attack dogs!"

Ben snickered as he took his position in the bushes and sat down on the ground to wait for the fun to begin. Sean

returned the ladder to the van and drove back to the campus. He had to cram for a test.

The interior of the compound was covered with rough terrain that was perfect for soldiers to play war games; however, Charlie had been told that the five-mile-square training ground was no longer operational since new recruits were being trained at Fort Dix in New Jersey.

A half an hour later, another van pulled up to the main entrance to the compound, and three new recruits and three current members exited the van. Milo extracted a ladder from the luggage rack atop the van and propped it against the ten-foot-tall fence. Justin, another current member, laughed insidiously as the group assembled for instructions.

Mark, the president of Alpha Phi Omega, addressed the blindfolded trio, who were already sweating bullets. "OK, plebes, the way this works is you are to climb this ladder, and lower yourselves down into the compound on the other side of this fence. You are to stay inside until we return to pick you up at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. If for any reason you leave the area before we arrive, you will be immediately disqualified from membership into APO. No matter what you may hear or see during the night, you must hang in there until morning."

"What do you mean by that, Mark?" questioned Marty as he looked about inquisitively.

"Hey, you dumb shit, that's for us to know and for you to find out. Here's a flashlight so you don't kill yourself running into trees. Now get your asses over the fence so we can get on with setting up the frat house for tomorrow's big bash."

The recruits dutifully climbed the ladder and lowered themselves down into the quivering darkness that lay silent behind the wall. The ground was covered in mist, and an eerie breeze whined in the trees.

"Legend has it," Milo piped in, "that some soldiers died a hard death behind these walls during the Civil War, and sometimes they come looking for the ones that tortured them to death."

"You don't believe in ghosts, do you?" Mark laughed, and the other two made spooky noises as they threw the

ladder into the back of the van, climbed aboard, and drove off.

When the van's headlights disappeared, the whole area was enveloped in total blackness. There was no moon. Even the stars had disappeared into the dark thunderclouds.

"Christ, it's dark out here. Snap on that flashlight!" the recruit named Robert ordered.

"Who died and made you boss?" Craig retorted, visibly nervous from the pitch-blackness. "Where is your flashlight? Did you leave it in the van?"

"Of course not, numb nuts! We don't want to use up all our batteries in the first hour. We need to conserve," Robert replied.

The light from Craig's flashlight darted about the area where they were standing, but the beam did little to illuminate the dense terrain within.

Suddenly, Marty's eyes fell upon the big red letters of the sign Walt had strategically placed just before their arrival.

"What's this shit? 'BEWARE! This area patrolled by vicious attack dogs!'" Marty whined. "Those guys wouldn't put us in here with a bunch of Dobermans would they?"

"No way! We're just joining a club, not offering up our lives to martyrdom. What good are we to the frat if we're dead?" Robert answered.

Just then the sound of vicious, barking dogs in the distance split the silence.

"This can't be happening; those bastards wouldn't do this to us."

"Hey, guys, take a good look at this sign. It looks like it was just painted. Do you think that somebody's just reactivated these digs for combat, and Mark and the guys don't know about it?" The sound of the dogs got louder from the left and seemed to be getting closer.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm not staying around here to find out." The threesome ran to the fence and started trying to help each other up to the top. The sound of the dogs was getting uneasily closer. The fence was too high for them to climb, and they finally had to give up trying to scale it.

"Let's find a tree to climb away from the barking. We

need to get off the ground,” Marty shouted.

They all turned on their flashlights since they couldn’t see their hands in front of their faces in the pitch-blackness.

Without warning, the sound of the dogs began directly in front of them. They immediately turned to flee in another direction.

“I can almost feel the gnashing of teeth on my legs,” Craig whimpered. “Maybe I’m not Alpha Phi Omega material after all.”

“Shut the hell up and find a tree!” Marty screamed.

Like madmen they veered to the center of the woods. They ran and ran in a frantic flight for survival. The lights from the flashlight danced chaotically through the undergrowth. Their faces and arms were bleeding from the limbs that cut into their flesh as they ran blindly into the terrain in search of a tree that would allow them to get off the ground before the dogs found them.

Totally exhausted, Marty grabbed Robert and Craig, and they paused to survey the situation under a large tree they had approached.

Marty looked at the limbs on this tree that were lower than any they had come upon and considered it climbable. “Help me reach that limb, and I’ll pull you up.”

“Turn off that light,” Robert gasped as he tried to catch his breath and lifted Marty higher in order to reach the lowest limb.

“This tree isn’t overly substantial, but at least we’re off the ground,” Craig exclaimed as the three recruits found purchase on their own limb of the tree.

The sound of the dogs ceased abruptly. After a minute of silence, the barking resumed, but now it seemed as if it had moved closer to the entrance than it had been a minute ago. Then as before, it stopped entirely. Five minutes passed, and the barking started again to the left of where they had first heard the hellish sound.

“Shit! It sounds like the whole woods are filled with these fucking hounds!” Craig muttered and bit his fingertips nervously.

“Quiet, we need to think,” Marty said.

"We'd better think fast...I don't think we're far enough off the ground to save our asses," Robert whined as he eyed the distance to the ground.

Suddenly, the sound of a vicious dog scared the threesome shitless, piercing their ears as if the dogs had climbed the same tree they were hidden in. They looked at each other and waited for the gnashing teeth.

Marty turned his flashlight toward the limbs behind them. There, taped to a branch, was a big, black speaker pouring out the sound of a pack of vicious, barking dogs.

"Those assholes," Craig shouted with a sigh of relief. "This is all a hoax after all. Boy, they really had us going for a while."

"That's not what you said five minutes ago. Let's hope that they didn't hear you whimpering like a wuss," Robert reminded Craig.

"Quiet!" Marty whispered. "Let's play along with them until morning or when they call us to come out." The sound from the speaker that was piercing their ears stopped abruptly. They waited in silence for ten minutes, which seemed like an hour.

"It appears that our comrades have decided to call it quits. They've turned off the sound system. They must be getting thirsty for a brew," Robert said as they waited for the barking to return.

"Not so fast," cautioned Marty. "I don't think they've doled out enough torture. Last year's plebes were under the gun for five hours, according to what I was told. I'd rather be sitting here in this tree chilling rather than being abused all night. Let's lay low a while longer."

Finally, after another hour passed and there was still no barking, the three recruits climbed down from the tree and started walking back toward the entrance. Their eyes had grown more accustomed to the dark, and they proceeded stealthily without the aid of their flashlights.

Marty, who was leading the threesome, stumbled over something in his path, and he fell forward on top of it. His hand landed on a pile of something wet, warm, and grisly. He jumped up and turned the flashlight on it.

"It looks like Jerry," Marty said as the others turned on their flashlights and shined them on the fallen frat brother, who was lying face down on the path with his eyes closed in what appeared to be a pool of blood. His shirt and jeans were shredded and streaked with dark stains.

"C'mon, Jerry. Get up! We're on to you. We found the speakers. You're going to need a lot more vampire blood to fool us," Robert barked triumphantly.

Jerry lay still. Blood seemed to ooze from several holes in his shirt and from a horrible gash on his thigh.

Craig nudged him with his shoe, but Jerry didn't move and continued to ooze.

"Stop clowning, Jerry. Enough is enough," Marty said as he turned him over and shone the flashlight on his face.

One of Jerry's eyes was dangling from its socket, and his throat has been ripped out. The threesome stood aghast. They couldn't fathom what was happening, but they knew something had gone very wrong. What was supposed to be a big joke was now a big disaster, and their very lives were on the line.

On the ground beside Jerry was a small remote control unit about the size of a TV remote. Marty picked it up and pocketed it.

They stood there in a state of shock, their energy drained. Unexpectedly, the sound of the barking dogs began again. This time much closer than it was before.

"What are we going to do now? It must be a mile to the fence,"

Craig whimpered. "We'll never make it."

"Let's go back to the tree and think," Robert suggested. The sound of barking from the direction of the tree dismissed this idea.

Suddenly they heard someone screaming and flailing through the underbrush in the distance, and all at once they saw a figure running into the clearing before them. A pack of large black dogs that appeared to be Dobermans were chomping at the heels of the screaming frat brother. They all recognized the familiar voice of Ben, who was communicating at a higher octave than usual, but his voice was still

recognizable.

Harry, another brother, was writhing on the ground about fifty feet to the left of where Ben had come running. He was being eaten alive by another pack of voracious canines.

The threesome hesitated for a moment to decide whether to attempt to rescue one or both of their beloved frat brothers or to make a second attempt at scaling the ten-foot fence and escape with their lives. A violent ripping sound followed by silence answered their question as Harry stopped struggling and let the dogs have their way with him without further interference.

"We've got to get their attention away from us," Robert exclaimed as he remembered Jerry's remote that Marty had picked up. "Turn on the barking with the remote. Maybe it will distract them."

Marty turned on the back left speaker, and the barking started behind them and to the right as they faced the fence. They bolted as the dogs ignored them and continued ripping Ben and Harry's flesh into bloody bits. The recruits ran as fast as their legs would carry them into the woods. They stayed as much away from the branches and underbrush as they could without any light to guide them. The pitiful cries of other frat brothers filled the night in every direction as the sound of barking, both real and staged, filled the compound.

They finally made it to the clearing and the entrance of the compound. Behind the fence, an empty van sat with its headlights on shining toward the fence. The headlights allowed them to see the horror that continued to unfold.

To the right, they saw Mark hanging from a tree limb with five Dobermans trying to sink their teeth into his butt, hell-bent on pulling him to the ground. Mark screamed with each lunge of the vicious attack dogs.

After several futile attempts at reaching him, two of the dogs started jumping up to grab the end of the limb Mark was hanging from with their teeth. This brought the limb closer to the ground and allowed the other dogs to finally reach him.

A scream of mortal pain filled their ears as the weight of three Doberman's hanging by their teeth from his exposed body finally brought Mark to the ground with a sickening thud.

The dogs all joined in the feast as his body was tossed to and fro like a puppet as he succumbed to a sea of bloody teeth.

The recruits moved as fast and silently as they could to the left toward the fence. Robert and Craig both put out their hands to create a foothold for Marty and, with all their strength, lifted him toward the top of the fence, just as another set of hungry dogs spotted them.

Marty finally reached the top of the fence with his hands, and with all his might, he pulled his body to the top and straddled the fence with his legs. With one arm holding on, he reached down for his friends.

The dogs were coming. Their eyes blazed with frenzy. Craig grabbed Marty's hand, and Robert lifted him up as high as he could until Craig grabbed the top of the fence with his other hand. Robert jumped desperately to grab onto Craig's body to escape the Doberman onslaught. He couldn't hold on and was immediately covered with the black vicious beasts, which ripped him to shreds.

Craig was also not high enough to escape the wrath of the vicious hounds, and he too was pulled from Marty's arms and devoured by the raging throng. Marty slipped from his perch atop the fence and fell to the ground on the other side. The dogs ran back and forth along the fence trying to find a way to get to him.

Tears streamed down his face that was covered with blood from the ordeal he alone had survived. He lay there wailing, shrieking, and cursing the loss of his friends and the pointlessness of their supreme sacrifice.

As he lifted his eyes from the ground, he realized he had fallen upon a battered sign lying all but buried in the thick grass. He turned it over and lifted it toward the headlights that were still ablaze on the van. The dirty white sign was pocked with bullet holes and still had a big spike hanging from the top where it apparently had been affixed to something. He read the big red letters that would haunt him for the rest of his life, "BEWARE! This area patrolled by vicious attack dogs!!!!"



Dinner For Two

Frederick was head over heels in love. He had been trying for three days to pop the question to Elisha without success. Each time they were together, he had been so nervous he could hardly breathe. He felt as if his tongue weighed five hundred pounds.

He looked at his cell phone in anticipation. Elisha was supposed to call him at 10:00. It was 9:59. His heart was thumping in his chest like a windshield wiper in a driving rain.

The phone exploded with the *2001: A Space Odyssey* ringtone, and he flipped the phone open and answered in a fit of amorous bliss.

"Elisha, I love you. Will you please marry me?" Frederick blurted excitedly, leaving no chance for wimping out this time.

"Oh, yes, Frederick! I will marry you! I've told my mother so much about you already, but she has no idea how serious our relationship has become. I know she will be so excited to finally get to meet you. I will arrange for you to come to dinner tomorrow evening at about seven o'clock to discuss our nuptial plans with Mother."

"That's wonderful, darling! I'd like so much to meet your

mother. Good-bye for now, and remember I'll love you even more tomorrow than I do today."

"Good-bye, darling."

The next evening, Frederick picked up Elisha in his Grand Marquis and followed her instructions to her mother's house. After about a half-hour drive, they approached the small cottage that was situated in a densely wooded area about one mile off the main road. Frederick was surprised to see five late-model cars parked along the left side of the driveway.

"Will there be others joining us for dinner? I was hoping we could have an intimate discussion about the wedding."

"I assure you that you will have mother's full attention and no other guests have been invited to dine with us this evening. Mother loves to collect cars, and these are just a few of the recent models. She has an auto graveyard just beyond the trees, which she is extremely proud of."

"Really, how interesting."

Frederick surveyed the house and the grounds and wondered how many acres her mother's property occupied.

"Does your mother live alone out here? It's so isolated from everything."

"Yes, ever since my father passed away she's been living here alone. After so many years, I guess she's accustomed to the seclusion. She's always lived a very private life."

Unseen at the window, Elisha's mother peered from the shadow of the curtains to the driveway below and watched her daughter and the young gentleman approach the entrance in a lover's embrace. Like all the others, this young man was attracted to her daughter like a moth to a flame. She looked at the twenty-four sets of car keys in her trophy case. She was excited to add a brand new Grand Marquis to her collection. A smile broadened on her hideous face, and her eyes widened as her hand tightened on the butcher knife she had concealed beneath her apron.

She heard the rapping on the front door, and her nostrils flared as she descended the stairs. The pang of insatiable hunger filled her loins.

“What was your mother’s reaction to tonight’s engagement?”

“She said it was a wonderful idea and that she had been looking forward to having you for dinner.”



Lake Ridge Poultry

I will never forget the three months I worked at Lake Ridge Poultry in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in the summer of 1963.

I was seventeen at the time and needed a job until my first year of college started in late August. My best friend, Orville Rodman, had a car, and I didn't; consequently, I had no choice but to ride along to whatever job he selected and hope they would have an opening for me. This was my first job, and I was glad to get it, even though it paid the minimum wage of \$1.25 per hour.

When we pulled into the parking lot of Lake Ridge Poultry, I was extremely nervous. I hoped I could fulfill whatever task they gave me satisfactorily. It was not in my

nature to ask what Lake Ridge Poultry would do for me.

Arriving early that Monday morning, Orville and I went to the personnel office, filled out the proper forms, and were ready to begin work when the plant opened at nine o'clock.

The first task my supervisor gave me was to work in the ice department. I picked up blocks of ice with metal forceps and placed them in a chipping machine on a wooden platform just outside a side door to the plant. The chipper automatically sprayed the ice chips into an enormous room inside. After chipping several blocks, I went into the twelve feet high space and looked in awe at the mountains of ice that almost completely filled the room.

Stepping inside, I immediately noticed the floor was very slippery. I only had room to stand along a narrow strip next to a spinning rotor with large, menacing stainless steel blades that carried the ice to the packing department. After I carefully shoveled several large piles of ice chips into the rotor, I went back to placing the blocks of ice into the chipper.

Around 12:30, I broke for lunch and joined Orville in the driveway to eat the ham sandwich, the apple, and the cookie my father had packed in my lunch box. He told me the supervising ogre that screamed instructions to everyone as if they were deaf, had given him a job in the eviscerating room. "Eviscerating" is a fancy term for pulling the guts from the chicken. He'd been performing the disgusting task ever since the plant opened. He didn't say it, but I knew he would've traded me for the job in the ice department in a heartbeat.

While we were talking, a stranger who sat nearby said, "You boys are new aren't you? I don't think I've seen you before."

"Yeah," I said. "This is our first day. I'm Billy, and this is my friend, Orville."

"What do they have you doing?" The man lit a cigarette and placed it between his yellow teeth.

"I'm in the eviscerating room so far," Orville replied dejectedly.

"I'm cracking big blocks of ice and shoveling the chips into a rotor,"

The man stared at me for a moment and replied, "You

must have taken Chester's job."

"I don't know. I didn't meet anyone named Chester."

"No, I guess you didn't if you just started this morning. You see Chester slipped on the ice Friday afternoon and fell into the rotor. He was ground up like hamburger before you could say shit. Four guys spent the whole weekend cleaning up the blood and guts, so we could start operating again this morning."

Orville and I looked at each other in disbelief as the stranger folded his brown bag and placed it in his lunchbox. "You better keep your mind on what you're doing and get some rubber boots for traction. The shoes you're wearing will put you on your ass or in the rotor lickety split. The ice room is a deathtrap. Ask anybody."

"Thanks for the heads up," I said as he walked away.

For the remainder of the afternoon, I was twice as cautious as I had been in the morning not to follow Chester into the rotor.

The next day, my supervisor, replaced me in the ice room and put me on the eviscerating line with Orville. He gave me some yellow rubber gloves to wear and showed me how to extract the innards of the chicken properly. Looking at my hands, he indicated that they may be too big to get my fingers deep enough to get under the heart and pull it out. With a great deal of disgust, I thrust my hand into the chicken and extracted the guts. These insides had to lay along side the body in order for the inspector to determine if the chicken was diseased. The chickens hung from shackles on both sides of a stainless steel trough. It took four workers on each side of the line to keep up with the speed the chickens were coming.

After a half hour, I noticed the sharp bones inside the chicken had cut my rubber gloves to ribbons. Because of the size of my hands, I couldn't get my fourth finger under the heart. My supervisor came to me several times complaining about my smashing the heart and making it unacceptable for inclusion in the giblet package. I noticed the middle-aged lady across from me had lost all the fingernails on both hands from the continual striking of sharp bones day after day.

After three hours of smashing hearts and slicing up two

sets of rubber gloves, they removed me from the eviscerating line. After lunch, my supervisor gave me the task of stuffing giblets in the completely processed chicken. This was the final task before packing it in ice. Orville joined me a few days later, and we gratefully fulfilled this task for most of the remaining time we worked at the plant.

Several times that summer, our supervisor asked us to work on the weekend, and we agreed, since the plant paid overtime at time and a half. Unfortunately, on weekends, only Orville and I stuffed giblets rather than the customary four. The line started slowly and got progressively faster. The speed just before lunchtime and closing was greater than two stuffers could manage. The incident reminded me of the *Love Lucy* episode where Lucy put wrappers on chocolate candy on an assembly line because she couldn't keep up. Likewise, Orville and I were stuffing half a giblet or just the wrapping paper in the chickens before lunch. The inspectors complained, but they knew it was impossible for us to keep the pace with only two giblet stuffers.

Our supervisor decided to torture us with the "gut wagon" detail several times during our final month. Orville had the job first, and after two weeks, the red-faced ogre saddled me with it.

As I mentioned previously, the US inspectors looked at the guts hanging from the side of the chicken for a sign of disease. When they spotted a sick chicken, they would trip the shackle, and it would fall to the floor. Unfortunately, whenever they found one sick chicken, it usually meant the entire truckload would be contaminated. It was my job to place these rejected chickens with their guts hanging out in a barrel on castors. When the *gut wagon* as it was called was full, I had to take it to the back room and weigh the contents to get a credit from the supplier.

The only time in my life I almost passed out occurred when I put my entire head into the barrel to reach the final carcass at the swarthy bottom and caught a whiff of a smell so foul my head began to swim. I had to steady myself on the barrel to keep from falling down. It was during this time I could no longer eat chicken, which up until then, had been one of

my favorite foods.

After several processes, the chicken encountered on its travels through the eviscerating room, it finally arrived at a machine that severed the final piece of flesh attaching the head to the body. A metal tub positioned under the machine caught the heads, which the plant sold to mink farms. Apparently, minks love to chew on chicken heads. Yummy. Whenever the tub would overflow and the heads spilled on the floor, the gut wagon man would come to replace the filled tub with a new one.

Several times, I saw some of the male workers parading around the eviscerating room with chicken heads between their teeth to scare the female workers.

One day, a truckload of chickens ran off the road, and the line stopped for lack of product. It took about twenty minutes for a chicken to travel from the delivery truck to the giblet line where I worked on that fateful day. This one time event allowed me to see the entire operation from beginning to end. When the next truckload pulled in, I watched workers remove the chickens from their wire cages and place their feet into a shackle. Dangling upside down, the chickens jumped wildly about until they struck an electric screen, which knocked most of them unconscious instantly. The few that did not touch the screen correctly continued to jump wildly on their journey into the plant down a long corridor with a trough in the center. About halfway down the line, one man sat on a wooden stool dressed in a yellow apron. He had a knife with a slim blade in his right hand. When the stunned chicken reached the man, he grabbed its extended neck with his left hand and slit its throat with the knife in one fluid motion. He did this all day long. I will never forget the blood spraying on the man's bright yellow apron and running down the trough like a river. The plant processed thousands of chickens daily. This one man with the yellow apron killed them all. I will remember this snapshot in time till my dying breath.

Several months after I left the poultry plant, I read in the newspaper that the man who killed the chickens had lost his mind and couldn't distinguish between fact and fiction. One day, instead of going to work at the plant, he wore his yellow

apron to the Woodstock Mall. Standing at the bottom of the escalator behind a pillar, he slit the throats of ten shoppers with his trusty chicken knife as they reached the bottom of the stairs on the first level. The authorities reported the man would have killed many more shoppers if the dead bodies and severed heads had not clogged the escalator tracks. Most of the unfortunate victims never saw the carnage and blood lust before them until it was too late due to the location of the Victoria's Secret store on the right side of the escalator.

What you have read is a true account of my experience while working for minimum wage at Lake Ridge Poultry in 1963, that is, except for the last paragraph, which is a ridiculous fabrication. If you did believe the carnage by the man in the yellow apron at the Woodstock Mall was true, I know a bridge in Brooklyn I would like to sell you.



Cyclops

Jed Norman received a telephone call from Harvey Hawkins in mid-August 1967. Harvey was a former classmate at Strasburg High School who had moved to Pennsylvania after graduating three years before.

When Harvey attended Strasburg, everyone in the small town knew that his folks were extremely poor. He had been missing his right front tooth for most of high school, and for that reason, he never smiled when they took his picture for the yearbook. Before he moved away, he lived on a farm ten miles off the main highway, Route 11, and was notorious for bumming rides whenever he needed to come to town. Jed

assumed immediately that this is why Harvey was calling him now since they had never been friends and hadn't seen each other for three years.

Jed and Harvey exchanged a few pleasantries about current events for a few minutes and then Harvey finally got around to the reason for the call.

"Look, I'm visiting with my grandma for a couple of weeks, and I was wondering if you could do me a big favor and let me catch a ride with you to the Woodstock Fair next week. I'd be happy to help you with the gas since you'd be going out of your way. You always treated me well at school, and I don't know anyone else I can turn to."

Jed rolled Harvey's words around in his mind for a few seconds and finally said, "Sure, I can swing by your grandma's place and pick you up. You can forget the gas. I don't mind doing you a favor."

Harvey's voice cracked with emotion as he continued, "You don't know how much this means to me. To be honest, I already called everyone I know, and they all turned me down. You were my last chance."

"That's OK, you can put the ride on your list of things not to worry about. Your grandma still lives in the green house at Columbia Furnace?"

"She sure does."

"I'll pick you up at your grandma's on August twenty-ninth at six o'clock."

"I really appreciate it," Harvey beamed, "August twenty-ninth at six o'clock. I'll be there with bells on."

When Jed hung up the phone he was sorry he had been home when Harvey called, but once on the phone, he had not had the heart to tell him no. he felt sorry for him.

Harvey had always looked much older than his years, and even before he moved to Pennsylvania, he was already showing signs of going bald. He remembered that he had been held back a few grades and was probably close to nineteen when he graduated from Strasburg. He was short and stubby and had a gigantic head for the size of his body. He had always been someone only a mother could love and had very few friends. Since none of the girls in their class

would even speak to Harvey, he doubted that he had ever had a date.

The dog days of summer sizzled by, and August 29 arrived in a flash. It was Saturday night, and this was the last night of the annual county fair that had been running all week. When Jed drove up to the green house in Columbia Furnace, Harvey looked like a boy with a brand new toy. He was talking a mile a minute when he got in the car. He was dressed in a yellow cowboy shirt that looked like it came direct from the Grand Ole Opry. He donned a wide-brimmed Stetson hat and had a red bandana tied around his neck. His blue jeans looked brand new. The joy of going to the fair had transformed his personality entirely. He was nothing like the introverted soul Jed had known when they attended classes at Strasburg. It was a welcome change.

"Wow!" Harvey shouted straightening his crooked wire-rimmed glasses. "I can't wait to get to the hoochie coochie shows. I've been saving up all year for this one night."

"You know," Jed mused, "I'll bet almost every boy in the Shenandoah Valley had his first feel of a woman in a hoochie coochie show at the Woodstock Fair."

"Jimmy Yost said he was only twelve the first time he got in. The police stood right outside the tent and watched him go in with his hat pulled low over his eyes and holding up his dollar."

"It's unbelievable," Jed said as he accelerated past a slow car and veered back into the far right lane. "I can't believe the girls actually come out completely nude on a stage no more than eight foot square and go from there."

"With a hundred half-loaded farmers screaming like banshees with their elbows on the stage."

Jed and Harvey pulled into the fairgrounds in a cloud of dust and parked as close as they could to the action. The midway was standing room only, and the tents were decorated with huge banners with two-foot-high words that were shocking to the eye like "Macabre," "Bizarre," and "Weird." It was these shows that interested Jed the most. He had a fascination for humans that were deformed or had more arms and legs than they should have. He'd seen a lady with a

long black beard last year and a contortionist who folded his body into a small box the year before.

"I'll meet you right here in front of the Ferris wheel at midnight," Harvey said as he ordered a big hot dog with everything on it.

"Don't be late. I'm supposed to meet Timmy Miller at the Blue Stone Inn at one o'clock," Jed shouted over the din of the crowd and also ordered a hot dog.

Harvey turned away from Jed and disappeared into the crowd in the direction of the hoochie coochie shows. Jed finished the hot dog and strode off toward the freak shows.

On the way down the midway, numerous hucksters propositioned Jed. One man wanted to bet him he couldn't knock down a stand of milk bottles with one throw. Another said that he couldn't put an oversized basketball through a tiny hoop. Another carnie wanted to bet him he could guess how much he weighed within two pounds. Jed resisted these temptations and remembered that Skipper Norman had warned him about gambling at the fair. He said that no matter how easy the task looked, the game was rigged so you could not win. Skipper confessed he had learned the hard way. He had even gotten his nose broken when he tried to get his money back.

Jed had one of his best times ever. In addition to seeing three girly shows, the various rides like the tilt-a-whirl, the roundup, the scrambler, and the octopus added a welcome variety to the freak shows, which were much better than the previous year. He saw a woman with three breasts. He saw a man with no arms and legs that could lift his body off the ground with his tongue. He saw a cow with four ears and a boy with six toes on one foot. It was fascinating, and the night flew by.

After riding the roller coaster three times in a row and eating an enormous amount of fries and hot dogs, Jed was down to his last two dollars. Before him was the only side show he had not seen. There was a huge sign on top of the tent that read, "See it inside! Once in a lifetime! The Cyclops!"

It was five minutes to twelve. Jed knew he was supposed to meet Harvey at the Ferris wheel at midnight. He

decided this show was too good to miss. The “Cyclops” was the last show at the end of the fairgrounds, and there was no one waiting in line. Some of the tents across the way had already closed down. The hoochie coochie shows were mostly dark down the midway, and the final stragglers were marching toward the entrance to exit.

When Jed held up his dollar, the ticket taker gave him an odd look, but he decided to let him into the final show. The Coasters were singing “Little Egypt” as he found a seat in the dark interior. When his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he saw a scarlet curtain draped across a stage that was raised off the ground. He looked around and discovered that he was the only customer. The Coasters ditty stopped, and an organ that must have been behind the curtain started playing a death dirge like something out of the original Phantom of the Opera.

Dum, dum, tee dum, dum, tee dum, tee dum, tee dum....

“Wow!” he thought, “This show is really scary, particularly since he was alone.” The curtain started to rise, and he saw a man dressed in a flowing black cape floating above the stage about three feet off the floor. The man’s back was facing the audience, and Jed was mesmerized.

As the death dirge continued the suspended man started to turn. He could see thin wires attached to the man’s arms and legs, which led off in various directions on all sides of the stage. A strobe light began to pulse and then started to intensify as the suspended man’s body turned farther toward the front of the stage.

Jed’s jaw dropped as he saw the most horrible sight he had ever seen in a freak show. Right in the center of the man’s forehead was a large yellow eye with an enormous black pupil. The yellow orb bulged from its socket and glared in his direction. The grotesque eye reminded him of a squid’s eye he had once seen in an old horror movie.

The eye seemed to expand and contract like the beating of a heart. It fixed on him with overpowering, unblinking menace as it advanced toward the seat where he was sitting. Jed sat paralyzed with fear as the strobes accelerated across the hideous face and the death dirge built to an ear-splitting

crescendo.

Suddenly, two normal eyes blinked open from their customary position on the suspended man's head, and a flesh-colored material that had filled the eye sockets slid from his cheek and fell to the floor. These eyes, rather than threatening, seemed disoriented and confused as they darted to and fro as if searching every corner of the tent for some kind of nightmarish beast who was preparing to leap upon him and tear him apart. Not finding such a beast, the eyes suddenly fixed on Jed, who was sitting right in front of him. These eyes, rather than menacing like the one pulsating on his forehead, were sad and filled with pain as a tear rolled down the Cyclops's cheek.

A sudden sensation of *déjà vu* swept over Jed as he looked closer at the horrific figure that was suspended before him. He could see the man's face more clearly now, and although it was totally bizarre, it was also uncannily familiar. He had stitches on both sides of his forehead as if Doctor Frankenstein had just completed giving him a new brain. The big yellow eye that bulged from the middle of its forehead was encircled by crude, black stitches that seemed to be dripping tiny droplets of blood.

Jed was still trying to connect the dots in his mind when the Cyclops's lips parted and it started mouthing Jed's name over and over as the two normal eyes seemed to cry out for help. Jed immediately recognized the oversized head and the missing right front tooth that he had seen many times at Strasburg High. It was Harvey, but the words he mouthed were only gibberish since he had only an empty, bloody cavern where his tongue had been.

The music stopped abruptly as the scarlet curtain swooped down, and the interior of the tent was bathed in a flood of blinding lights.

Jed jumped up from his seat and started running for the exit.

Three carnies with lead pipes stood in his path looking him over to see what kind of freak he could be for tomorrow night's show in North Carolina.



Cliffhanger

Somewhere in the China Sea off the coast of Vietnam in 1968, PFC'S Harry Phillips and Sam Barnes said their final goodbyes to the men in their platoon. Afterward, they boarded a speedboat the crew had lowered into the water from an aircraft carrier. Artillery fire rumbled in the jungle along the coast. In the distance, they saw the U.S. military compound at the base of a rock face soaring high above the beach into mountainous terrain.

Harry was blonde, and of medium height; Sam was tall with dark hair. Both were twenty years old. Their tour of duty was over. All they needed was to sign the final papers, and they would be on their way state side.

As the speedboat accelerated, Harry shouted over the roar of the engine, "Hot damn! A quick trip to Major Jessup's office, and we're out of here. Can you believe it?"

"Yogi Berra once said 'It ain't over til it's over'." Sam yelled back. "Something's not right. I can feel it in my bones."

As the speedboat bounced through the waves toward the beach, more helicopters began to lift off from the carrier. U.S. military forces and artillery packed the beach ahead of

them.

“For Christ sakes, Sam. Everywhere I look I see our units. We’re golden I tell you.”

“I’ll believe it when I’m pissing in the barracks.”

Suddenly, a massive tremor shook the earth.

In the distance, they saw part of the rock face break away, which leveled some of the small buildings on the beach. Soldiers ran to escape the falling rock and debris. Behind the carrier, an enormous wave filled the entire horizon.

“Goddamn you, Harry! You eternal optimist. What is that I see coming behind the carrier?”

Harry’s eyes widened with fear as he saw the gigantic wall of water steamrolling toward them. “I don’t know what you call it, but it’s a big shitload of water.”

Harry floored the accelerator of the speedboat, and they hurtled faster across the waves toward the beach.

“We got a problem,” Sam shouted.

“What?”

“We’re too close to the cliff. This wave is going to pick this boat up like a matchbox and splatter it into a million pieces on the cliff.”

Harry looked back at the 100-foot wall of death smashing past the carrier toward them. Above the wave, he saw a helicopter heading their way with two evacuation ladders trailing below the aircraft. He yelled, “It’s Skipper! He’s going to try to rescue us.”

The distance to the rock face got shorter and shorter as the speedboat accelerated toward the beach, and the helicopter met the plane of the speedboat with the ladders.

“Get ready to jump!” Sam screamed.

“Now!”

Harry and Sam jumped from the boat onto the ladders, which jerked them immediately upward. The distance of the helicopter blades to the rock face was indiscernible as the giant wave bashed into the cliff consuming the speedboat, compound, and soldiers in a heartbeat

The helicopter continued to scale the mountain wall, finally rising above the cliff with Harry and Sam dangling on the ladders below.

As the helicopter reached the top of the incline, two enemy helicopters opened fire.

Skipper jerked upwards, sweeping behind a canyon wall to escape the gunfire. Harry and Sam spun violently on the rope ladders like two puppets. Darting into a pocket of jagged rock, their pilot changed directions to avoid further fire. The two enemy copters continued following right behind firing short bursts whenever they could. Shells from the helicopters exploded off the rocks.

Harry grabbed Sam's ladder and brought it together with his, "When Skipper turns the next corner, let's open fire on those mothers."

Sam nodded. Harry and Sam drew their revolvers and tried to position themselves to fire.

When the first enemy copter rounded the bend, they opened fire and wasted the soldiers in the cockpit. Veering out of control, the craft exploded into the cliff. The second helicopter peppered Skipper's craft with return fire, and it began to give off billows of black smoke as he retreated.

In the distance, Harry and Sam saw cables stretched across a canyon with a white water river raging below.

They opened fire on the remaining copter, which darted out of range. Skipper's craft sputtered as it flew over the cable car bridge.

Their ladders draped over the top of the cables as Skipper turned his craft to mount a last ditch assault on the attacking copter. Harry and Sam scrambled upwards, desperately trying to reach the cable. An enemy copter reappeared from around a bend and hit Skipper's craft with several more lethal rounds, causing it to explode in midair. The severed ladders they clung to began to freefall as flaming bits of debris from above whizzed past their heads and fell into the water below.

Harry's ladder miraculously caught on the cable bridge, and Sam found purchase several rungs down from Harry's grip.

The enemy copter circled for the kill.

"It looks like we're gonna get wet." Sam yelled to Harry, "If you make it and I don't, tell Jennifer I always loved her."

"You moron! Why would I tell the girl I'm gonna marry that you loved her?"

"Jennifer really loves me, you worthless bastard."

"In your dreams."

"Harry, If I'm dead, you're gonna take care of Jennifer if you make it back. Right?"

"I'm gonna take care of her if you do make it back. Get that through your thick head."

The helicopter was now in perfect position to fire.

"You're too short for Jennifer. She needs a tall man like me,"

Sam said, holding on for dear life as his grip started to slip.

"Cary Grant's not very tall, and he gets all the girls."

The pilot locked in on the cross hairs.

"Jump!"

The two fell into the raging rapids 50 feet below as the enemy copter opened fire.

Harry and Sam jettisoned through the rapids finally getting swept into a body of calmer water surrounded by jungle.

They washed up on the beach about one hundred feet from one another, exhausted and gasping for breath.

After several minutes, Harry struggled to his feet and checked his gun as he moved closer toward Sam, who had a bloody gash on his knee and was limping on his injured leg.

"Can you walk or will I have to carry you out of here?" Harry groaned as he approached.

"You better hope you don't have to carry me out of here. You don't look like you've got what it takes," Sam said, grimacing in pain.

"All your bullshit, will make it doubly hard."

Suddenly they heard the snap of a twig from the jungle. Both of them slid down in the mud at the shore and lay very still, half in and half out of the water.

From the jungle, a platoon of Vietcong soldiers advanced toward the beach. Harry and Sam started swimming away from them.

The enemy helicopter that had taken out Skipper's craft

hovered over the beach. The pilot, copilot, and several gunners surveyed the area where Harry and Sam hid in the undergrowth.

Jumping to his feet, Sam fired several bullets at the craft and its occupants. Gasoline spewed from the under belly as Sam fired again. The enemy helicopter disintegrated in midair.

"Are you insane?" Harry shouted. "Didn't you see the Viet Cong soldiers over there?"

"I had a perfect shot."

"You dumb shit!" Harry retorted as machine gun fire riddled the sand at their feet.

They darted into the cover of the jungle as the Viet Cong closed in from behind. Machine gun fire peppered the jungle around them. After fifteen minutes of Harry running and Sam hopping, they finally reached a clearing and took an assessment of their position.

They saw their troops evacuating a compound on the other side of the beach. The remaining soldiers were preparing to lift off in the last two helicopters. Harry and Sam took off along the perimeter of the jungle in a last ditch attempt to join them. The Viet Cong began firing on the evacuating troops, but a barrage of grenades and machine gun fire drove them to cover.

The first helicopter lifted off and accelerated upward as enemy fire peppered the craft, but didn't disable it.

From the trees, a sniper's bullet caught Sam in the back. He stuttered in midstride, and then fell in a bloody heap. Harry didn't see Sam go down, and continued running to the copter. A sea of arms lifted him on board as his comrades opened fire on the sniper in a tree and found their mark.

Harry looked about the copter for Sam.

"Where's Sam?" Harry asked the soldier sitting next to him.

"He's dead. The sniper wasted him. We've gotta go, or we'll all be blown to bits."

The copter was already smoking from enemy fire."

"I'm not leaving without Sam," he yelled under the roar of the rotor blades.

The soldiers looked at Harry in disbelief when he

grabbed a machine gun from one of the crew and jumped to the ground.

Zigzagging in the direction of where he'd seen Sam last, machine gun fire from both sides exploded up and down the beach.

Several Viet Cong soldiers ran from the jungle, and Harry mowed them down as he ran.

Searching the terrain, he finally located Sam. He was still conscious, but had lost a lot of blood from a wound in his right side. With all his remaining strength, Harry threw his friend over his shoulder and ran for the final helicopter still hovering just off the ground across the field.

Despite the heavy fire, his soldiers covered the two of them until they reached the craft. Harry lifted Sam into the arms of several soldiers in the copter as it lifted from the ground. Harry then lunged for the landing gear as the copter soared upward.

Seconds after liftoff, the area where the copter had rested exploded with a massive onslaught of artillery. Harry dangled from the landing gear as the helicopter disappeared over the trees and faded into the setting sun.



The Velvet Cage

In the heat of a summer's day in 1963, two middle-aged women swayed back and forth on a porch swing in the shade of a great mimosa tree that hung over the antebellum homestead. The grass was green, and the sun was afire as they reminisced happier times.

Mary looked at a little boy who passed on the sidewalk with his big wheel and said, "Joe's a kind man, and he's so good with the children. They love him so. I would have liked to have a career of my own, but when we had three children in three years, I had to settle on being a housewife. It's really been hard on Joe trying to make ends meet with only one

income, and college is right around the corner for all three.”

“Being a mother is a full-time job, and you really are good at it,” Cora said supportively.

“I hardly ever see Joe anymore since he started the graveyard shift. A night watchman is a lonely job, both for him and for me, but in this economy, there’s no way to be choosy.”

Cora paused for a moment and wiped some perspiration from her brow. “I know what you mean. It’s the same with Frank since he got his promotion. He flies off to Chicago or New York almost every other week, and here I sit in this big house alone.”

“I hate to say it, but you’re very lucky to be married to a man like Frank. You don’t have to worry about a lot of things Joe and I never stop worrying about.”

“Money isn’t everything,” Cora snapped. “Sometimes I wish Frank were just a simple man without such strong ambitions.”

“I guess I’ll never understand you, Cora. You have such a good life, but you’re never happy.”

“It’s hard to be happy when you don’t know the person you’ve lived with for seventeen years. I’ve never told you this, but sometimes Frank seems like a complete stranger. He comes home, gobbles down his dinner, and then he sits in his big armchair in the den and stares at the wall all night.”

“Maybe it’s his new position. People who make a lot of money have a lot of pressure on them. What does he say when you ask him about it?”

“He won’t talk about it. He just sits there staring. Maybe there’s another woman in Chicago or New York.”

“Cora, how could you say that about Frank? He’s always been so good to you and Millie.”

Tears welled in Cora’s eyes, and she started to sob. It was apparent to Mary that things were much worse than she had ever imagined.

“Get hold of yourself! It can’t be as bad as all that.”

Cora grabbed a handkerchief from her purse as she saw Fred and Millie drive up. She didn’t want her daughter to see her crying, so she retreated inside the house to freshen up.

Fred and Millie hesitated in the driveway and whispered

to each other.

Mary put on her happy face and greeted the teenagers as if nothing had happened. "Hello, young lovers. What have you been up to today?"

Fred and Millie both blushed at her remark and didn't know how to respond. They waved and scurried off toward the back of the house and the swimming pool.

Mary's smile faded as the young couple disappeared behind the house. She waited for Cora to return.

Cora reappeared at the doorway and rejoined Mary on the porch swing.

"Frank has changed, I tell you. We don't talk anymore. He goes his way, and I go mine. He's been going out late at night and coming home drunk."

"I had no idea."

"To make matters worse, I'm really worried that Fred and Millie are getting too serious. They see each other every day at school and after classes, and then he comes for her about four evenings a week. And the way they look at each other when they're together..."

"Oh, Cora, they're young. This is Millie's first romance. Don't you remember when you were their age?"

"I remember too well. That's what worries me. Millie should be dating other boys, but after seeing Fred for more than a year, it looks like she may never have the opportunity. My Lord, she's only sixteen."

"Millie is a good girl, and she'll do what's right. I've got to be going. I need to pick up something for little Joey's birthday."

Cora seemed shocked at Mary's remark. "He's having another birthday. It seemed like only yesterday..."

"He'll be three the seventeenth of the month."

"I wish I could've had another one. They're so cute when they're small."

"But, oh, what a pain," she chuckled as she left through the front gate.

Now that she was gone, Cora was not only worried, but afraid to think what would happen when Frank came home. He had been so mean to her the last few weeks. He'd even

slapped her the night before and broken a piece of her precious china when he stormed out. She had tried to be a good wife. She was a good cook, her house was always tidy, and she was more than receptive when Frank wanted to make love.

Frank was off today, and he'd gone out after lunch. She had prepared dinner and put on a little makeup in hopes that things would be better when he came home. She sat in a big armchair and started to re-stitch the hem on one of Frank's dress slacks. Her eyes began to fill with tears. She dropped the mending and laid her head back on the armchair.

A sudden clatter aroused her from a dead sleep. When she opened her eyes, the room was dark. She sensed it was late, but couldn't see the time. A shadow jerked across the room and overturned the lamp on the end table, which came crashing into pieces on the floor. The smell of liquor was strong on his breath as he crawled toward her.

"You've been drinking again," she cried as the tears started to flow once more. "Why, Frank? What's gone wrong with our marriage?"

"You are what's wrong, bitch!" he screamed and lunged for her. His hand grabbed her ankle, and he threw her to the floor. His hands clawed at her blouse as he clubbed her in the face with his fists. Tearing her dress to shreds, he pulled down his pants and mounted her as she writhed on the floor.

"Frank! Stop it! You don't know what you're doing!" she screamed.

"My wife," he shrieked hysterically. "Come, little woman, show me what you can do tonight."

Hours passed. Cora crawled along the floor to the master bedroom and continued into the bathroom leaving a trail of blood across the carpet and tile. Her face and her upper body throbbed with pain from the vicious beating. She lifted herself into the tub and struggled with the hot and cold handles, letting the water run over her. She lay there in what remained of her clothes as the water turned pink from the blood caked on her body.

She heard the sound of a door opening and heard her daughter's voice. "Mom, what's happened? Where did all this

blood come from?”

“Don’t come in here. Go to bed,” Cora ordered. “Don’t ask any questions, just go to bed. Your father and I have had a bad argument, and I can’t talk now. I’m alright.”

Millie paused at the crack in the half-open door and then disappeared into the darkness. She wondered if life would ever be same again after this night.

Frank changed his bloody clothes and combed his hair and drove off toward the city. He could see neon winking in the distance. He pulled into a strip joint. Red devils and pink elephants swam in his head, and the smell of hard liquor and cheap perfume was heavy in the air. He took a seat at the bar and ordered a double bourbon. The bartender eyed him reluctantly, but filled the order.

The girls bumping and grinding on the stage were past their prime. Most were fat and ugly with heavy makeup. They looked at him as an easy mark. It was obvious he was drunk and on the verge of passing out. It was just a matter of time. A platinum blonde with dark roots came up to him and took his hand. She smiled seductively and looked upstairs. He nodded that he was game, and she helped him up the stairs to a seedy room. The world was spinning as he saw her wrinkled, sunken face and felt his wallet leaving his back pocket.

Suddenly, the door burst open and he saw the silhouette of a man standing in the doorway. A naked light bulb blinded him, and he heard the man screaming. The woman in bed with him told the man to get lost. Frank was too drunk to care what was happening and shielded his eyes with a pillow. The two continued to curse at each other as his head began to throb with pain. He heard the thunder of two shots from a gun and felt his chest explode from the impact. He heard the sound of running and more screams as he lost consciousness forever.

Cora sat in her big armchair waiting for Frank to come home. She didn’t know how she could ever forgive him for what he had done, but she had nowhere else to go. Her hands trembled as she wondered how to handle the situation. She even blamed herself to some degree for his rampage, but she didn’t know what she had done wrong to cause Frank to

be so violent. She thought of what she would tell Millie and hoped the neighbors hadn't called the police.

Millie found her in the chair the next morning and couldn't believe how badly she had been beaten. She held her mother in her arms and slumped beside her. Cora patted her on the head as they both continued to sob for a time.

What had happened to the love they had shared? She remembered the birthdays, the Easters, the vacations, the Christmases. She couldn't conceive of how these happy times could ever come again.

"Millie, get ready for school," Cora ordered and looked into her daughter's eyes that were wet with tears. "I don't want you to be here when Frank returns. We have a lot to talk over. He was drunk last night and didn't know what he was doing. He will be sick when he sees what he has done to me. We'll find a way to work things out. I promise you. So go now."

Millie whimpered, but was too distraught to put up an argument. She did as she was told, and after dressing, she left for school. When she saw Fred waiting outside, she ran to him. He embraced her tenderly and brushed the tears from her eyes. He held her close for a few moments, and they headed off toward school.

About ten o'clock, a police cruiser pulled up in the driveway. Mary was consoling Cora and they were having a cup of coffee when they saw the officer approaching. Cora covered her face with a scarf and stood inside the screen as he came to the door. She could see by the look on his face something terrible had happened, and forgetting her bruised face, she ushered him in.

"Are you Mrs. Cora Mason?" the officer said removing his hat.

Cora nodded, too distressed to speak.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you," the officer began, "but your husband was shot and killed at the Lady Luck nightclub early this morning."

The officer continued with the horrible details of Frank's death, but the rest of his words fell on deaf ears. Their life was over. That was the bottom line. She sat on the kitchen chair, and the officer brought her a glass of water.

"The great lover," she choked as the officer put on his hat and left by the front door.

Mary put her arms around Cora to comfort her. "Now, now, Cora, sit down and have a good cry," Mary pleaded. "I can't imagine the hurt you must be feeling, and I hope I never will, but you've got to put this behind you and go on with your life. You've got Millie and me and Joe standing by you."

"Get out, Mary!" Cora cried. "Go home."

"Cora, what are you saying?"

"Millie and I will be moving away tomorrow. There's nothing here for me now but bad memories."

"You can't be serious. Don't let Frank's death destroy you and Millie. Where else can you go? All your friends are here. And what about Fred? What will Millie say?"

Cora sprang from her chair and slapped Mary in the face. "Get out, I said. I don't need you or anyone else. And Millie doesn't need Fred. I know what he's after. The same thing all men want."

"No! Don't say that. You're letting your emotions get the best of you. We've always been friends, and you need me now more than ever. I'll get Joe, and we can wait for Millie together."

Cora picked up a pair of scissors from her sewing basket, raised them into the air, and started advancing toward Mary. Mary screamed and ran out the front door.

"Cora, get a hold of yourself!"

"I'm telling you for the last time. Don't bring Joe over here. If you do, I'll kill him!"

Mary screamed and ran across the lawn and disappeared into her house next door.

Cora returned to the big armchair to wait for Millie. The hours passed, and the shadows deepened as the night fell once again. Her eyes stayed fixed on the front door as she sat mending a seam on her tattered dress. A needle pricked her finger, but she felt no pain. The clock on the mantle read midnight when she heard Fred's car pull up in the driveway. Cora darted to the front door and watched them through the tiny peephole in the door as they ascended the steps. She watched Fred caress Millie's hair with his cheek and bring her

close to his side for a goodnight kiss.

Cora's eyes widened with frenzy, and her mind snapped forever. She opened the door and stood in the shadows inside.

Her breathing grew faster and faster as she stroked the hem of her dress with long, trembling fingernails. The lovers were startled when the door opened so quickly, but when they saw her in the doorway, they smiled nervously.

"Gee, Mom, you sure scared us for a moment. What are you doing up so late? Did you and Dad make up? Are things back to normal?" Millie continued on and on with questions, but didn't wait for the answers.

Cora stood silent as her shrouded eyes glared at Fred and the way he was holding Millie. And then in a fit of rage she lunged at Fred with her bared nails and clawed at his face as she fell upon him and they tumbled onto the grass.

Millie screamed again and again and grabbed her mother in a desperate attempt to protect Fred from the hysterical attack. Fred rolled away, stunned and bleeding.

"Run!" Millie pleaded. "I'll be alright."

Fred hesitated, but Millie lost her grip on her mother as she struggled to resume her unexplained attack on Fred once again. Cora found her scissors in her apron, and she scrambled toward him shrieking madly.

Fred ran to his car and jumped in. The Mustang sputtered for a second and then roared into motion. Cora lashed out with the scissors through the open car window and ripped a large gash in Fred's sport coat as the car thrust forward into the black night.

Millie saw his headlights come on and watched him disappear from her life in a smoky cloud of dust. Cora lay prostrate on the street, clawing at the asphalt with her broken, bloody fingernails. Lights from the adjoining houses winked on one by one.

* * *

Years passed, and the sleepy little town had seen the last of Cora and Millie. Fred knew in his heart he would always love Millie, but after receiving no word from her for five years, he married someone else, and they had two children.

No one knew where Cora and Millie were living. It was as if they had disappeared from the face of the earth. Fred had sent letters to the old address in hopes they would be forwarded, but he never received a reply and finally gave up.

"Millie, your supper is ready," Cora announced as she slid a tray of roast beef, mashed potatoes, and peas through the elongated slot in the door. She put a glass of ice tea through the iron bars of Millie's room and placed it on a ledge.

The beautiful young girl who had lost her boyfriend, Fred, twenty-five years ago lay on satin sheets and velvet blankets dreaming of the wedding day that never occurred. She wasn't young anymore. Her hair was turning gray, and wrinkles had started lining her face. She looked down and saw the plate of food on the floor next to the barred door. She walked over and sat down beside it. She picked up the wooden spoon and, with dainty sophistication, proceeded to dine. Afterward, she placed a linen napkin neatly to her lips, shoved the tray back through the portal in the door, and returned to bed. Millie's room was beautiful and adorned with satin, velvet, crystal, and fine china dolls. She had beautiful things, but all she really wanted was for Fred to come and take her way so they could live happily ever after.

"He'll come, Mother. Maybe tonight," she said with the same anticipation as she had every night for all those years. Through the lace, she saw the windows with cold iron bars and waited to see if she could see a star fall in the heavens. She counted falling stars and listened for Fred's footsteps on the stairs. "how long has it been since he wrote?"

"He hasn't written. Why should he? He can't fuck you anymore, so why should he write?"

"You're lying, Mother! You're keeping his letters from me. I hate you! I hate you!"

"You don't know men like I do. I couldn't bear to see him treat you like your father treated me."

More days passed, and Millie lay in her velvet cage dreaming of sweet yesterdays of long ago and of the wonderful day when Fred would climb the stairs, break down the door, and whisk her back into his arms and his life.

She jumped out of bed and ran to the open window. Her

hands slid down the cold iron bars that stood vertically in front of her. She raised the window slightly, and the wind whispered through the crack, foretelling of the winter and the snow that would soon make everything cold and white. The falling leaves drifted past the window, and the thousand stars twinkled in the night sky. The moon looked like a big vanilla wafer dangling in a pool of licorice ebony. The trees sighed in the breeze, and the sounds of the forest that encircled the house crept up the ivy-covered walls and through the bars, touching her lonely heart.

The scent of evergreen seeped into the candlelit room. She loved candlelight. It made the room seem so magical. The cool breeze disheveled her hair as she turned from the window and slipped into the shadows where the light of the moon couldn't penetrate. She lifted the straps of her flowing pink gown and let it drop to the floor. She saw herself in the mirror in the flickering candlelight. She no longer saw the adolescent features of a growing teen, but the mature body of a woman. Lines of sorrow and loneliness had replaced her freckles and her girlish smile. She opened the dresser drawer, took out the creamy smooth negligee she had been saving for her wedding night, and slipped it on. She returned to bed and thought of Fred coming down the aisle on their wedding day. Her gown was ivory, and she was so beautiful, and Fred was so handsome. They embraced and a thousand pink rose petals danced in the summer breeze.

She thought she heard footsteps on the stairs. Or was it just the wind seeping into the cracks and crevasses of the old house and making human sounds? She listened for a long time, but there was nothing to hear but her own heart beating. The wind had gone to sleep and left her alone.

* * *

Summers, winters, and the seasons in between vanished as calendars were discarded each January. The fading years and broken dreams were hard on Millie. She was no longer a young woman; she was sixty years old. Her hair was gray, and her face was wrinkled. It had been years since she had smiled. The mirror was not her friend, and one day

she broke it into a thousand pieces with a candlestick.

And then one day, her mother died in the rocking chair on the front porch. Millie was disoriented when there was no dinner.

"Mother," she called. "Where are you? Isn't dinner ready yet?" Again and again she spoke to the silence behind the locked door.

Another night of moon and stars passed slowly for Millie. The pattern of what seemed like a thousand years was finally broken. The sun came up through the pines. Millie lay there on her bed dreaming the same old dream. First, she imagined, there would be footsteps. A heavy tread unlike the steps of her mother. Then a key would unlock the door, and it would creak open. Fred would be standing there smiling. Then he would sweep her up into his arms and kiss her tenderly. He would look into her eyes and tell her how much he loved her.

Fred stood at the grave side by side with his son and daughter while the clergyman tried to comfort the friends who had come to the funeral. Arlene, Fred's wife, had died painlessly in her sleep four days ago, leaving him alone with a big estate and a heavy heart.

Fred had done very well in his business. He was retired with an income stream that would last far longer than he would ever need. He had enjoyed a wonderful life with Arlene, and they shared a lifetime of happy memories together. His children were both happily married and had their own lives far away.

After the ceremony and the gathering at the house were over and all of his friends and family were gone, he pondered what he would do with his life after Arlene. He really didn't have any hobbies, and since they had just moved into a new neighborhood, he hadn't made any friends. He felt so blessed to have lived such a happy and prosperous life, but the one thing that had always haunted him was what had happened to Millie, the girl he had loved as a teen so many years ago. He had loved Arlene with all his heart, but he had never felt the same degree of love he had felt for Millie. His heart ached for Arlene and still at the same time for Millie. Once and for all he needed to find out what happened to her.

He remembered that the post office had said Cora and Millie had moved to a small town called New Market in the Shenandoah Valley. He packed up some things and headed south for Virginia in his Lexus. It was only 250 miles to New Market, and it would be a beautiful ride over the mountain since the leaves were turning at this time of year.

About a half a mile from Millie's house on the outskirts of New Market, a construction crew was building a new road that was to cut through the tip of the property on the south side. The state had sent letters to all the property owners months before concerning the easement necessary for the new road. Cora was one of the few owners who had not responded to their correspondence, and the check they had cut in payment for the strip of land had not been cashed. The matter had to be resolved, and the state official had been instructed to contact each owner before the crew cut the road through the property.

Four more days passed, and Millie was extremely weak and fading in and out of consciousness from lack of food and water. Her throat was so dry her voice had been reduced to a whisper from crying out to her mother.

Suddenly, a sound far away pricked her ears. She listened and tried to cry out, but she could no longer speak. Again, she heard the sound, closer this time. She sat upright, and the wind whispered through the cracked window. She heard another foreign sound and then a creak on the stairs. Her heartbeat began to accelerate.

His name was a prayer singing on her lips. Softly, softly, she heard the sound of someone climbing the staircase. It wasn't Mother. It wasn't the wind. It was a man—a stranger to this place, possibly someone she'd known long ago.

The last step, and now he was behind the door.



Seance

Ever since they married in 1991, they constantly debated whether spirits remain after death. Marvin could only laugh out loud when Beth mentioned she had plans to attend yet another séance to communicate with her dead father.

“Please, Marvin, make me happy just this once and go with me,” Beth pleaded as she put on nylon stockings. “I get all goose pimply in the dark when the medium is conversing with the dearly departed.”

“Take a sweater or two with you, darling. I have better things to occupy my time.”

“Like what, my darling?”

“Oh, I think I’m in the mood to see if the sun still sets in the west. Or I might count how many steps it is to the Amelia swimming pool from our front door.”

Marvin punched a few keys on his laptop and started deleting junk mail from his inbox.

“I wish you’d be serious for once. You’ve been living with a guilt complex ever since your mother disappeared. Wouldn’t you like to finally find out what happened to her?”

“It’s been fifteen years, Beth,” Marvin said, tired of hearing his wife’s constant reminder of what happened so long ago. “I don’t think a total stranger can solve a mystery now that hundreds of policemen, relatives, and friends couldn’t solve for a year after it happened.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. That’s what they do. If your mother is dead, the medium can call to her from the other side and find out if she blames you for forgetting to pick her up at the train station. He’ll also know if she met with foul play.”

“Please, I really don’t want to talk about it. I don’t believe in ghosts, and I never will. Go and have a spooky, good time.”

Finally, the clock told Beth she had to be on her way. She was already ten minutes past the time she’d planned to leave. She planted a wet kiss on Marvin’s cheek and hurried to the Mercedes in the garage.

He heard the garage door rise and then close. He saw raindrops on the kitchen window as he sat down in his armchair to work on today’s crossword.

While completing the puzzle, his mind drifted back to that fateful day in 1996. He had forgotten to pick up his mother at the Newark train station at 6 p.m. When he finally remembered and arrived three hours late, he couldn’t find her.

The mystery of what happened to her had been devastating and had plagued him ever since. He’d had no messages on his cell or his answering machine at home. When the police showed her picture to every vendor and ticket clerk in the station, no one remembered her. Months passed, and not one clue surfaced. She and her two large suitcases had disappeared from the face of the earth that summer evening.

About a half an hour after Beth had left for the séance,

the phone rang. Marvin rarely answered the phone since almost every call was for Beth. He jokingly told all who came to visit, he had no friends. He listened to the answering machine just in case it might be for him. He heard a woman sobbing into the phone. The sound of the voice seemed familiar, but since she'd uttered no words, he continued listening for her to identify herself by saying something.

"Marvin, Where are you?" A resonating female voice finally muttered in a whispery gasp while she continued to sob.

He picked up the phone and said, "Who is this?"

"Why didn't you come?" Came the reply, which sounded as if it had come from another world. The words echoed from what sounded like a bottomless pit in a driving rain. The static on the line made the words so faint, Marvin couldn't be sure he heard them correctly.

"Mother, is that you?" he responded as a tear rolled down his cheek. He listened with the receiver pressed against his ear. The line remained open, but the caller was silent as Marvin listened to the static until the connection clicked dead.

Suddenly the scent of Shalimar, his mother's favorite perfume, filled his nostrils, and the ceiling lights in the kitchen began to flicker incessantly. Throughout his life, he had dismissed the concept of ghosts as ridiculous; however, what he had been witnessing now could not be rationally explained. The smell of the perfume was not a hallucination. He'd never heard of a brownout in the month of December. No thunder. No lightning. Not a cloud in the sky. If someone were working on the line, the electricity would be off, not flickering.

Maybe Beth had been right all along, and his mother was trying to tell him something. Even if what he was experiencing could be explained, what was the downside of having an open mind?

He jumped up from his chair, raced to his car in the garage, and headed to the civic center. He wished he had showered and changed his clothes, but there was no time. When he arrived, he saw a crowd of people having a snack and a drink during intermission. He paid the \$30 admission fee and began searching for Beth. He had to choose one of

four rooms, and with so many people in each room, he decided to pick one and hook-up with Beth later. After taking a seat, he perused the people in the audience, and confirmed his wife had not chosen this room.

Looking about the large dimly lit space, he saw candles burning in each corner. In the center of the room, he saw a long rectangular table with about twenty people seated around it. A haunting dirge played softly in the background. He assumed this must be the eerie ambiance required to speak with the dead.

A middle-aged man appeared from the shadows and stood behind a young couple on the other side of the table. He started speaking in a soft, soothing voice, "I see an elderly woman's spirit smiling down on you. She wants me to tell you that although she did not support your marriage when she was alive, she regrets the way she tried to keep you apart. She now knows how much you love each other and wants you to know she blesses your union and wishes you happiness."

The young couple smiled and looked at each other as if a great burden had been lifted from their shoulders.

Marvin grimaced at the stock reply that would appease anyone without demanding any facts to substantiate a connection to the hereafter. But, after several more demonstrations by the medium with others in attendance, Marvin became amazed at what he had witnessed. How could this total stranger know so many personal things about people he'd just met for the first time? There could be skills in the audience who were part of the act, but some of these people had to be on the level. The real test would come when the medium came to him, and he was next in line.

The man finally stood before him and touched his cheek. A painful look appeared on his face as he began, "I am so sorry for your loss. I see a young woman in a car. It's raining and..."

"A young woman?" Marvin thought. "His mother had been sixty when she'd disappeared. A car? Maybe someone abducted her in a car. Raining? He didn't think it rained that night."

He smiled, and knew he had been right about ghosts

after all. The medium had been wrong on everything. He didn't have a clue about his past and was just making up something to say, which Marvin thought incredibly ballsy on his part in front of all these people.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not here about a young woman. My mother was sixty when she disappeared. I forgot to pick her up at the train station, and since that night, no one knows what happened to her. I came here tonight, because I've been living with the guilt ever since."

The medium stood looking at the space to the side of Marvin and continued, "I'm sorry, uh...Marvin. Is that your name?"

"Yes," Marvin answered, shocked that he knew his name.

"Your mother is not here with us tonight. I see a young woman who is very dear to you. She is a young woman about your age. I believe her name is Beth."

"Beth?" Marvin sighed in disbelief. "No! You've got it all wrong. It's my mother I want to know about. Beth is my wife, and she's here in one of the other rooms. She's a true believer."

"I hate to be the one to tell you, but it's your wife who's on the other side, and she's trying to reach you. She has an important message...."

Marvin heard Beth's voice inside his mind and recognized it as the voice on the phone. It hadn't been his mother after all. He also remembered Beth sometimes wore Shalimar. In fact, he smelled the sweet fragrance when she'd kissed him goodbye before leaving the house. "I love you, my darling. I was driving too fast in the rain, lost control of the car, and crashed into an embankment. Tell the children I love them, but most important I wanted you to know your mother is still alive. She's not here with me on the other side."

"Beth!" Marvin screamed. No! This can't be happening!"

The scent of Shalimar seeped into the room. The candles flickered for a few seconds, and then the medium moved to the next couple.



Falling

"It's hard to cry your eyes out at your father's funeral when his passing has made you a multimillionaire," Janet thought as she tried on a smile and admired the Monet over the mantle that would soon be hers. In her opinion, she had played her part magnificently to the cast of three hundred at the ceremony. Half of the vultures had come to the gravesite in order to get a free meal at the Manor.

Her father had been killed in a head-on collision when a drunk driver crossed over into his lane. She couldn't believe he was gone. The huge house seemed like a monastery without his large, booming voice shouting orders to anyone who would listen.

She looked out through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the expanse of the estate that stood on a knoll overlooking the ocean and saw dollar signs. Probate would take time, but soon it would all belong to her.

"I'm going out. Are you all right?" her husband, Brad, asked as he removed his black tie and picked up the car keys from the end table.

"As well as can be expected under the circumstances," she lied. "I'll probably be in bed when you come home, so

don't wake me."

After Brad left the estate in his Mercedes, she heard her daughter

Melissa playing a video game in the game room. Janet's father was in the ground next to her mother, but life went on at Shell House like nothing had happened. Alfred, the butler, brought her a martini, and she snapped on the news.

Later that night, a bloodcurdling scream startled Janet awake. The clock on the end table read 3:25 a.m. Brad was sitting up in bed with his eyes open shaking violently. She knew from experience he was still falling in his nightmare.

She placed her hand firmly on his shoulder and shouted like she had a hundred times, "Brad! Snap out of it! You're not falling. You're having that dream again."

She steadied him and then clapped her hands in front of his face as loudly as she could. His T-shirt was soaked with sweat as his eyes began to focus.

When he finally stopped shaking and began to breathe normally, he put his arms around her and pushed her backward into the pillows. He kissed her and squeezed her right breast.

She struggled from his grasp. "Brad! It's three in the morning, and I'm definitely not in the mood."

Brad turned on his side and stared at the wall. Janet lay beside him and stared at the ceiling.

The honeymoon was over, and they both knew it. Janet wanted to sleep in a separate bedroom, preferably in a separate state, but she had promised Brad even before they were married that she would be there for him when his dreams were severely traumatic. She hated being a martyr, but she knew how devastating a phobia could be. She once had a bad experience with turbulence on a flight when she was ten years old, and no matter how many therapists she visited, she continued to take a train when traveling rather than a plane, much like the sports commentator, John Madden. It wouldn't be long until she would be out of the relationship, but she was determined to keep her promise until then.

She loathed Brad since she had discovered his infidelity

that fateful night three months before. It happened in the middle of the night. She had been sleeping when something glass fell on the tile floor in the living room and shattered into a thousand pieces.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Brad shouted when he realized his attempt to sneak into the house without turning on a light in a severe state of inebriation was not working. After standing in silence for a few moments, he fell over a piece of furniture onto the hard tile. He was writhing in pain on the floor when Janet switched on the light. His face and shirt were smeared with gaudy red lipstick, and he reeked of cheap perfume, sex, and booze.

In seconds, he passed out on the floor. She left him there and went to bed, but didn’t sleep.

The next morning, Janet had the maid clean up the broken glass and straighten the living room before Brad awoke. She was sunbathing at the family pool all morning to avoid him.

They never spoke of the matter, and consequently, she didn’t know what Brad remembered.

A week later, she received photos of Brad embracing various buxom females in several restaurants and hotel lobbies from a private investigator she had hired.

Digging deeper, she hired a CPA to audit their accounts. In a few days, the CPA provided a report showing a series of large withdrawals to vendors she had never heard of. There was also \$150,000 in cash missing from the wall safe in the den.

Based on her current accumulation of evidence to secure a divorce, she worried about what Brad would do when he found out. If anything happened to her, Melissa would inherit the family fortune upon her twenty-first birthday. The only way Brad could get the inheritance was if both she and Melissa were eliminated.

The final straw came when Melissa dove off their yacht for a swim and Brad returned to shore without her. He said he was drunk and forgot Melissa had been aboard. It was a long swim, but Melissa had managed it. She was close to hypothermia when she finally reached the dock.

Janet wondered if this was an accident or a premeditated attempt to eliminate Melissa. Brad was not Melissa's father and they had never enjoyed the warmth of a father-child relationship.

Melissa was extremely fond of her real father and was devastated when he and Janet got a divorce when she was ten years old. Janet had tried everything to mend their relationship to no avail.

Janet couldn't prove that Brad was capable of such extreme measures, but somehow, based on the women, the missing funds, and the Melissa incident, she was beginning to think he was not just the sophisticated, pinheaded Adonis she thought she had married, but a calculating fortune hunter whose goal from the start was the inheritance. This is what her father had claimed all along.

She remembered the name of someone her father had hired to take care of a ticklish matter a few years ago. The name was familiar since the surname was the same as the mobster on HBO—Soprano. Her father had pointed out the house where Soprano lived when they were visiting a relative a few years ago.

Janet was shocked to find his name and telephone number with the other law-abiding citizens: John Soprano, 609-324-8986 in verona.

Her hands trembled as she dialed. The mobster answered on the third ring. "Soprano, who's calling?"

"This is Janet Wright. I'm Henry Atwill's daughter. I believe you did some work for my father a few years ago."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Wright, I never conduct business on the telephone."

Janet winced and thought how silly she was to call a mobster on a line that could be tapped. "Sorry, Mr. Soprano, I totally understand the need for discretion. I will send you a FedEx package with instructions where we can meet."

She had Alfred send the package asking Soprano to meet her in the parking lot at Pal's Cabin at 3:00 p.m. the following day.

She told him what car she would be driving and the color dress she would be wearing.

Janet arrived early and parked in the location she'd mentioned. At 3:00 p.m. sharp, a man in a business suit pulled up in a Mercedes, got out, and walked toward her car. Janet got out and met Soprano in the parking lot. He extracted a wand from his coat pocket and waved it over her body.

Satisfied that she was not wired, he spoke, "Mrs. Wright, I am surprised that you know about the business I conducted with your father. It was a very delicate transaction that was carried out with the utmost discretion."

Janet relieved him somewhat by saying, "I don't have any knowledge of the business you conducted and have no interest in finding out what it was. I have seen your name in the papers a number of times, always in connection with alleged mob activities."

Soprano looked at her with cold eyes, but let her talk.

"I am desperate to resolve an extremely delicate matter and don't know who else could help me. I only remembered your name because it is the same as the show on HBO."

"It's amazing how much business that show has generated for me," he mused as a smile crossed his lips and his stern manner eased. "Mrs. Wright, I don't know you, and you don't know me. This could be a trap for you or a trap for me. The only way we can do business is through a third party who I can put you in contact with. That way I stay in the clear if anything goes wrong, but I get a small finder's fee for my trouble. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"The person I will recommend does not come cheap. He does meticulous work, and consequently, the work is guaranteed once the fee is paid. If you or anyone else rats to the cops, the act will initiate a contract on yourself and anyone else who has been involved in the bust." He paused to think for a moment and then continued. "Oh, one more thing, once the money has been paid, there's no turning back. Whatever the contract is for is what will be executed—nothing more, nothing less. For this reason, you must be sure you really want what you've paid for. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Be here tomorrow evening at ten p.m. sharp. Bring a

hundred thousand dollars in unmarked bills in a briefcase. The task you request will determine the amount of money required. You need not fear being robbed. We may be called upon for...shall we say... unpleasant tasks, but we are honorable. That's why your father hired us. Good luck with your future endeavors. I assume we will never speak again."

Soprano returned to his car and drove away.

The next night Janet returned with a briefcase containing \$100,000 in cash. The man that met her was not driving a car, but appeared from the far corner of the driveway through some shrubbery. He was dressed in dark clothing with a knit hat that concealed most of his head and a beard that covered most of his face.

The parking lot was dark, and business along the highway was sparse. The man opened the rear door of the car and sat in the backseat. After the wand ritual, a low voice said robotically, "What is the task?"

"My husband is planning to kill me and my daughter and —"

"This is not my concern. What is the task you want completed?"

"I am not a murderer, you need to—"

Again he interrupted, "Why is not my concern. What is the task?"

"The task is to kill my husband, Brad Wright, as soon as possible before he kills me and my daughter. He lives at 3 Maguire Drive in West orange. he works for the omar Corporation in New york City."

"Are there any special instructions on how to accomplish this?" the voice said coldly.

"What do you mean?" Janet sought to clarify.

"Do you want him tortured or killed in a special way? Like having every bone in his body broken? Be drawn and quartered? Burned at the stake?"

"You just don't blow his brains out?"

"We're professionals. We will travel to the ends of the earth to fulfill the specific method of execution you desire. Our range of service starts at twenty-five thousand dollars for a local hit and runs up to our Elite Service with everything on it,

which costs one hundred thousand dollars. It all depends on what degree of pain and suffering you want the victim to experience and the length of time you want us to spend administering it.”

“I don’t hate Brad that much. I’m only doing this in self-defense. I think a case of suicide would be the most desirable way for him to die for all concerned. The specifics don’t matter. Surprise me. I don’t want to know.”

The hit man entered data into an iPhone to arrive at the final price. He made a short call, which caused his demeanor to darken.

“Finally,” he said dejectedly. “I’m afraid that we are unable to fulfill your request concerning Mr. Wright. There is a conflict, which I am not at liberty to discuss. I am sorry we have wasted each other’s time and must advise you that our business proposal is null and void. Please do not attempt to reach us in the future at the risk of bodily harm or death. Any attempt to contact the police concerning this matter will be dealt with in the harshest of terms. Goodnight.”

The man opened the door of her car and walked away as fast as he could to where he had entered the parking lot. Janet shouted, “What is the problem? Why can’t you fulfill the contract?” but he never looked back.

She pounded her fists on the steering wheel and sat staring into space with no clue as to what she was going to do next. It was clear that Brad had already hired these thugs to eliminate her and poor Melissa. They were bound by some kind of mobster fair-play rule not to make a contract with a victim already under contract. She needed to get Melissa and make a fast getaway to a remote location—hopefully one with a tropical climate.

When she arrived home, she was met at the door by two police officers with long faces. The first officer removed his hat and stated officiously, “I’m sorry to be the one to tell you that your husband has apparently committed suicide. A note was found in his wallet on the street. He said that his life had been a total nightmare and he’d always been a loser and well,” the officer paused, “you can read what he said when you’re feeling up to it.”

“Are you sure you’re at the right house?”

“I’m sure. The deceased is Bradley Wright of 3 Maguire Court, West Orange. He worked at the Omar Corporation in the Empire State Building. In fact, that’s where he took his life.”

“What?”

“We don’t know how he managed it, but somehow he found a way to get to the highest floor with access to the street and jumped.”

“That’s impossible. He was deathly afraid of falling. He never took the elevator higher than the second floor, which is where his office is.”

“I’m sorry,” the officer explained. “I’m just telling you what I was told. A team of investigators has been at the crime scene for several hours. The jump occurred at about nine p.m. The body has been taken to the morgue for the autopsy. The ME says the deceased is definitely your husband, Bradley Wright. Apparently his fingerprints match a set we have in our computer records from when he was arrested for demonstrating as a teenager in 1979.”

Janet tried to reason with the officer concerning Brad’s death, but his only suggestion was to make a statement at headquarters. When the officer left, Janet rushed inside and turned on the alarm system.

Over the next few weeks, Janet remembered a number of other unsavory characters her father had conducted business with. Brad had also been involved in some of these shady dealings only a few weeks ago, which must have led to his murder.

With her husband dead, she no longer felt that she and her daughter were in imminent danger. It was apparent that someone had already placed a contract on Brad’s life before she had contacted Soprano. Since she had never been personally involved in such matters, there was no reason for the mob to come after her. Nonetheless, to be on the safe side, she hired two bodyguards who were both as big as a house to watch over Melissa and herself until the estate was settled. She also hired private investigators to look into Brad’s secret life in hopes that it would lead to why he had been

murdered.

A few nights later, she was awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of something breaking on the first floor. She called the lead bodyguard, who answered on the first ring.

“What was that noise? Something fell on the kitchen tile and broke. Is everything all right?”

“We spotted an intruder and—”

The voice was interrupted, and Janet heard a gurgling sound on the phone. Then the house was swallowed in blackness.

A different shade of black moved through the bedroom door, and a bright light blinded her as she heard the sound of rushing feet across the carpet. She felt something prick her arm and swooned into unconsciousness.

Janet awoke in a stupor, bound and gagged to the seat behind the cockpit of a small plane. Through the windshield she could see the panoramic view of a mountain range. She immediately gripped the armrest with bared knuckles and began to convulse.

The man sitting next to the pilot looked like the man she had met at Pal’s Cabin. “I was wondering when you would come to,” he said without expression. “We’ve been circling this mountain for over an hour, and I want to get home for the fight. I shelled out forty-one dollars for the pay-per-view on HBO, and I don’t want to miss it.”

Janet continued to shake uncontrollably and was finding it hard to breathe as the horror of the huge mountain loomed menacingly before her. Her fear of flying sent violent tremors to every pore of her body. She tried to scream, but her mouth was filled with rags and taped shut.

“No need to struggle, Mrs. Wright. Conserve your energy,” the man said in a monotone voice. “Now that you’re awake, we can start some very frightening flight patterns to get your heart pumping. We can even fly upside down and do some curly cues for a while. That should really give you an adrenalin rush.”

Janet’s eyes widened, and her heart was beating like a jackhammer as she struggled for each breath. The pilot

plunged the plane into a series of nosedives.

When the plane leveled out, the voice resonated on the loud speaker, "We strapped Brad to a 'super shot.' That's the thing that lets you freefall a few hundred feet. We let him fall continuously for about four hours at an amusement park. There was no one around, so we just let him scream. He was pretty much a vegetable when we got him to the Empire State Building, but he just wouldn't die."

The pilot motioned to the man who was talking to her, and he grabbed a black bag and started rifling through the contents with an amused look on his face.

He extracted some paperwork and read each word carefully to be sure he was following the contract to the letter. He shook his head in amazement and read the instructions a few more times to be sure.

With a grin that filled his face from ear to ear, he spoke into the microphone, "Your daughter wanted you to know she was truly sorry she had to have Grandpa eliminated, but it was unavoidable. She also wanted me to tell you she really got her money's worth when she saw Brad splatter all over Thirty-fourth Street...but that was nothing compared to what she has planned for you."



Something In The Woods

In the crosshairs of his scope, Josh Kerner, saw a mixture of hair and what looked like part of an antler. After bagging nothing for two days, he didn't want this golden opportunity to slip away. Exhaling slowly, he squeezed the trigger. As the shot echoed through the forest, he felt confident, but not certain he'd fired on a large animal. He just didn't know what kind it was.

As the grey mass toppled over, he heard an ear-splitting wail so loud and so long, it must have been heard for miles. The excruciating cry of despair struck him as more human than animal. When it finally ended, the dark woods became deathly quiet. In his gut, it felt as if he had awakened an enormous beast from a long sleep with a mission to kill every bird, animal, and insect that made a sound. He'd never experienced such a creepy silence, and it chilled him to the bone.

Looking through the scope to the left and right of the area where he'd seen the animal, Josh saw the silhouette of a

large mass fall from an erect stance to a four-legged crouch behind a fallen tree. The grizzly was the only animal in the woods that could stand erect like a human as far as he knew. If that's what he'd wounded, his rifle had the firepower to deal with it. However, the thought of confronting a grizzly still frightened him as he made his way through the underbrush toward the kill zone.

Approaching the spot, Josh had the overpowering sensation something lurked behind every tree in his path. His eyes darted to the right and left and then turned in all directions with his rifle at the ready. Finally, he saw a large hairy beast sprawled against a tree. He circled the carcass cautiously until he saw the creature's dead, open eyes staring into the sun filtering through the limbs. The bullet had penetrated its left eye and taken off the upper part of its head. Josh stood with his mouth agape looking at the beast in disbelief, knowing he couldn't put a name on what he'd killed. The creature was sitting with its back against the tree just like a human would sit. Long grey hair covered its entire body, and a black horn protruded from the middle of its forehead. Its facial features appeared more human than animal. The beast reminded Josh of the drawings he'd seen of the Yeti or Sasquatch on the sci-fi channel, except for the horn.

Still circling the carcass, he noticed something writhing from the creature's underbelly. As he inched closer, he shuttered at the sight of the tiny creature struggling to survive. Regretfully, he realized he'd killed a mother giving birth when he'd blindly fired into the underbrush.

He sat on the fallen tree and watched the baby creature squirming to free itself from its mother's womb. Finally, the offspring emerged with its eyes shut and crawled to its mother's teats.

Josh watched the pathetic sight, knowing that without its mother's milk, the baby would certainly die of starvation. He had killed all kinds of animals without any pang of guilt, but killing a mother birthing a newborn had awakened emotions he didn't know he had. He didn't want to harm the struggling offspring, but he couldn't leave it to starve or be ravaged by the other predators that would soon find it. Taking a deep

breath, he put the newborn out of his misery with the butt of his rifle.

In the distance, Josh heard the same forlorn wail he'd heard when he'd shot the mother. The combined loneliness and pain of the pitiful, heart-wrenching cry was a sound that would live in his nightmares to his dying breath. Remorsefully looking at the mutilated bodies before him, he noticed the creatures had hands and feet like a human rather than the hoofs or paws of an animal. He began to feel faint as a migraine began to pound in his temples.

He always field-dressed the animals he killed, but this time he couldn't get himself to do it. The ordeal had ruined his appetite even for the best venison steak he'd ever tasted, let alone this pathetic beast. He wanted to leave the forest right now. He prayed he would live long enough to forget this harrowing experience. The blood of the baby creature had splattered his boots and the cuffs of his pants. He couldn't wait to take a shower to cleanse himself not only of the smell of death, but the guilt of it, as well.

On the ground next to the creature's remains, Josh noticed a book half hidden in the leaves. Picking it up, he saw the spray of blood across the cover, which read, "Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*." Riffing the pages, he found a flat green leaf between pages seventy-nine and eighty that appeared to be a bookmark. He reached down beside it and picked up a pair of blood splattered reading glasses with a missing left lens. The left eyepiece of the frame was broken, discolored, and bent inward.

He stood there dumbfounded, unable to process the meaning of what he held in his hands. An eerie breeze whispered in the leaves tugging at the edges of his Boston Red Sox baseball cap. Could the creature have been reading a book when he shot her? After a time, he smiled at how ridiculous this conjecture was and wasted no time returning to his truck.

While unlocking the door, he noticed someone had broken the side window. Upon further inspection, he discovered they'd slashed one of his tires. His fishing rods, additional rifles and ammo, two iPods, and a laptop stored

behind the front seat remained untouched. Opening the glove box, he discovered his registration card missing along with his GPS unit.

Why would someone want his registration card? Why steal the GPS and not the more expensive items? Nothing about this strange, depressing day made any sense.

After finally finding his jack, which he found under the truck, he fixed the tire, ate lunch, and headed for home.

Almost immediately, he noticed a piece of paper stuck in the visor. Pulling to the shoulder of the road, he opened it and read, "I don't consider you a bad sort. You're certainly not as merciless as the majority of hunters who plunder these woods simply for the sport of killing; however, killing my soul mate when she was giving birth to my child is unforgivable and begs for my retaliation."

Josh looked at the writing in astonishment and couldn't imagine who could have written such a ridiculous note. Perhaps it was some animal rights fanatic who didn't understand that without hunters to reduce the numbers of wildlife in these woods, the animals would become so plentiful they would starve to death?

He continued to read, "As you have discovered by now, I broke into your truck and removed your registration card to determine where you live. I mounted your GPS on my car to locate your house. I also found a picture of you with a woman and a little boy. I assume this is a family photo. I also took the liberty of removing the cell phone you left in the truck due to the forest having no service and slashing your tire. I hid your tire iron in an odd place, but if you're reading this note, you must have found it. By the time you reach the nearest telephone, I will have found your house and exacted my revenge on your family."

Throwing down the paper, Josh floored the accelerator. It would take at least forty-five minutes to reach his house driving as fast as he could, even if the police didn't pull him over for speeding. Since the nearest phone was twenty minutes out of the way, he decided not to take time to call the police.

An hour later, he pulled into his driveway. Through the

large picture window, he could see a noose hanging from the foyer chandelier. The front door stood ajar with a child's bloody handprint on the wall next to the jamb. Pushing open the door, Josh saw a chair positioned just below the noose in the center of the room. The end of the rope was tied to the banister at the bottom of the stairs and looped through the chain supporting the large light fixture from the ceiling. Blood splattered the three adjoining walls and the foyer floor. Several articles of his wife's clothing along with his son's teddy bear lay partially immersed in a standing pool of scarlet.

The intense feeling of loss stopped Josh in his tracks. Frozen in the utter horror of what his eyes beheld, he couldn't make himself take another step beyond the foyer for fear he would see Caroline and his son's mutilated remains.

He stood there, consumed with guilt, wishing he could turn back time. He thought about the moment right before he pulled the trigger when the world was beautiful and filled with promise and happiness. The thought of never seeing his precious family again was too much for him to bear. He couldn't think of a reason to go on living. Climbing up on the chair, he placed the noose around his neck and stepped into the eternal abyss.

* * *

Later that evening, Josh's wife, Caroline and his little boy, Billy, returned home after a crank call had sent them on a wild goose chase. Someone posing as a doctor had said Josh had run off the road and crashed his truck. He was in critical condition at Seminole Hospital. After arriving at the emergency room after an hour and a half drive, they found the accident had been a tasteless joke. Caroline had called Josh repeatedly on his cell, but had gotten no answer.

When Caroline finally stepped into the house with Billy, she detected the fresh smell of a cleanser on the first floor. It was particularly strong in the foyer. Inspecting the other rooms, she found nothing out of the ordinary except for a slight discoloration on the banister at the bottom of the stairs and a smudge on the hard wood floor under the chandelier. She wondered if Josh had come home while they were gone.

When Josh didn't return that night as planned and didn't call, Caroline notified the police and reported him missing. In the months that followed, teams of men searched the forest where Josh always hunted and every side road from there to his home and found nothing. The authorities never found his body or his truck. His disappearance remains a mystery to this day.

Some nights, a mournful wail emanates from the forest where Josh hunted. Experts who've heard the lonely, agonizing cry are at a loss to identify what animal could make such a human sound. A number of hunters reported seeing a longhaired creature that stood erect and then ran on all fours. One of them captured the beast on film, but no one took it seriously when they saw the creature wearing reading glasses.



Drip...Drip...Drip...

Rasgus peered from his hotel window on the fourth floor of the Marriott Marquis to see what kind of view he would have. It was News Year's Eve, and it had been snowing for most of the day. The weatherman predicted the wind chill at Times Square would be close to ten below by midnight. Opening his balcony door, he ventured out to get a better look. A cold gust of wind sent him scurrying back inside. From the look of the masses of people filling every street, avenue, and sidewalk below, the weather had not dampened their desire to make merry. Outside, the night teemed with raucous laughter, horns blaring, and the racket from every noisemaker imaginable.

From his vantage point, most people appeared to be sharing the joy of the season with someone as midnight drew closer. Unfortunately, he had the misfortune to be alone on this auspicious night in an intimidating metropolis, but as a consolation, he planned to make the most of it by watching the ball fall, not on TV, but first hand from his balcony. For the past six years, Rasgus had been with his family for the countdown, but as luck would have it, his firm had planned a

special presentation on New Year's Day, and he was to be the guest speaker.

After having four Bombay Sapphires at the bar and finding no one stimulating to talk with after dinner, he retired to his hotel room to watch the preliminary broadcast on TV. After returning to the room, he discovered he had misjudged the time. It would be another hour before Dick Clark would start his annual telecast. Kicking off his shoes, he decided to lie on the bed to gather his thoughts for his speech in the morning. Unfortunately, the incessant buzzing of the crowd accumulating in the streets made it difficult to concentrate.

Despite the hubbub outside, Rasgus began to detect the monotonous sound of water dripping in the bathroom. Since repetitious sounds like water dripping or a clock ticking made it impossible for him to relax or go to sleep, he went to the shower and placed a towel on the floor to catch the drops falling from the showerhead. This worked for a few minutes, and then he could hear the drops of water hitting the wet towel. It was a different sound, but still impossible to ignore. He called the front desk and asked for another room, but since the hotel was completely sold out for this special night, the desk clerk said she would send a repairman to fix the problem.

After waiting a half an hour for service, Rasgus decided to leave the hotel and take a brisk walk. Even with his heavy overcoat, two scarves, and a hat, the intense cold chilled him to the bone. To make matters worse, the number of people waiting for the countdown made it impossible to walk on the sidewalk or the street. He tried a few more bars, but every one of them was standing room only. Returning to the street outside the Marquis, he pulled his coat around his head as the wind whipped about his face mercilessly.

At midnight, still standing on the corner next to his hotel, Rasgus saw the ball fall. The crowd roared as the New Year came in with a flurry of snow that blanketed the air with white magic. Couples in the crowd locked themselves in long embraces, welcoming in the New Year with a kiss. Fireworks exploded in the sky for about a half an hour. Whistles, bells, horns and uproarious cheering contributed to the celebration.

While circling the block, he saw a group of police cars with flashing red lights surrounding a nearby alley. He overheard that someone had gone there to take a pee and found a dead body. One policeman said the victim's head was missing. He found the tone of their remarks surprisingly matter of fact for a case involving a decapitated corpse. But considering this was the Big Apple, he concluded a missing head or two on New Years Eve might only rate a couple of lines on a back page of the morning paper. A gruesome crime like that would cover the whole front page in Fall Church, Virginia.

Deciding this was too much excitement for one evening, and feeling vulnerable from being alone with so many people bustling by, Rasgus returned to the hotel and to his room on the fourth floor. Before turning in, he sat in a chair at the window, lit a cigarette, and peered into the darkness below. He could see portions of a fire escape outside along the brick wall adjoining his small balcony. The proximity to his room didn't worry him since a ladder would be needed to access it from the street. Police cars scurried about for another half hour before the flashing lights stopped and things returned to normal. He felt a little jumpy, but brushed his teeth and went to bed.

Sometime during the night, a sudden gust of cold air awakened him. Opening his eyes, he saw the heavy curtain in front of the balcony doors quivering in the wind. Pulling the covers around him, he lay very still, trying to make sense of how the sliding door had come open. Had he left it that way when he went out earlier? Why hadn't he noticed it before?

Peering into the shadows, he listened for the slightest sound and thought of the headless victim the police had found not far from the hotel entrance and the fire escape next to his balcony. His pulse quickened. He could hear his heart pounding in his chest. The lights from the street filtering through the curtain cast weird shadows on the wall. After fifteen minutes of total silence, and to stop his teeth from chattering, he gathered enough courage to go to the balcony doors and close them. He inspected the closets and the room without consequence. Pouring himself a glass of water and

chugging it, he heaved a deep sigh of relief and retired once again to bed.

He lay there unable to sleep for what seemed like an eternity. Suddenly, he heard the steady drip, drip, drip from the shower stall. His nerves were totally raw as he covered his head with pillows to deaden the monotonous sound he knew would eventually drive him insane.

He reached for the phone and without turning on the light, hit the illuminated "O" for the operator. A pleasant voice said, "Hello, this is the front desk. How may I help you?"

"This is 408. I called for a repair earlier, and apparently the water in my shower is still dripping," he said with an irritated tone.

"Yes, Mr. Rasgus, we sent a maintenance man to your room at 10 p.m. He indicated he fixed the problem. Are you certain you're still having a problem with your shower?"

"Just a second." Rasgus listened in the darkness, and no longer heard the dripping. "I guess I'm mistaken. I don't hear it any more. Sorry. Thanks."

Hanging up the phone, he lay there listening to the silence for another fifteen minutes.

Then the drip started again. Drip... drip... drip... the most annoying of all the repetitious sounds that had plagued him all his life. Waiting for the maintenance man was no longer an alternative if he hoped to restore his sanity and get any sleep at all. With a loud "fuck!" he leaped from bed and went to the bathroom to fix the problem. He hoped he would not find a maniac lurking behind the shower curtain.

Reaching the door, he bravely turned on the light. "So far, so good," he thought. "No maniacs."

Rasgus pulled open the shower curtain with the bravado of Schwarzenegger or Stallone in their prime, and his courage immediately dissipated as he emptied his bladder into his boxer shorts and on to the green tile floor. There before him, swimming in scarlet, the bloody head of a one-eyed man stared up at him from the floor of the shower stall. His other eye dangled from its hollow socket, and blood oozed from the jagged wound around the severed neck. In the mirror, he saw something move in the shadows beyond the open door and

heard a sound no human could have made. He turned and saw a screaming madman lunging toward him with the tattered pieces of what had been a straightjacket trailing behind. A piece of shredded tongue protruded from his broken, yellow teeth as he raised a dagger to strike.

Rasgus knew at that moment the annoying drip...drip...drip of the drain and the speech he'd prepared for the morning were the least of his problems.



Street Cinderwine

It was early evening when Thomas wandered onto the street. The sun had just disappeared in a burst of oranges and reds on the horizon that was breathtaking from his vantage point on the steep hill. When he reached the crossroads, he looked both ways. To the right he could see neon winking and streams of light darting through the many intersections far off in the distance. He could hear the sound of the crowd mingled with the drone of engines and the intermittent wail of horns blowing. Thomas knew the sound of the rat race well, and turning away, he peered into the tranquility that abided to the left.

Leading away from the city was a time passage filled with trees and stars and mist. His eye caught a glimpse of the word "Cinderwine" written on the street sign as he passed with a smile and a song on his lips.

The houses along both sides of the street were dark with black windows that hung in the October leaves.

After a time, the asphalt turned to stone, and the houses and streetlights were swallowed in the mist.

"Free," he shouted aloud. "How wonderful to throw out one's arm and touch no one... to shout and disturb no one..."

The fog lifted as if swallowed by God, and his eyes beheld a meadow touched by moonlight. The scent of honeysuckle whispered on the breeze, as the dark branches seemed to beckon him onward.

After a time, Thomas wondered how far he'd walked as he strained to read his watch. It was hard to estimate, and he wasn't the least bit tired. Tomorrow was Saturday, and he didn't have to worry about the miserable commute to work. He reflected on his life and the plans he had made when he set out on his life's journey. They were as real then as the city he'd left behind a few hours ago and the road that lay ahead.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of footsteps coming from far off. Could it be that someone else was also searching for the peace of mind he was looking for? He kept his pace, wondering what he might say to the other wanderer. Would it be a quaint hello or a moment of silence as they met and passed each other by? He wondered if he would see the stranger's face in the darkness. Would he be greeted with a smile or with the standard scowl he had seen so often in the city?

A face appeared from the mist. A soft, young girl without a smile stood trembling before him. He wanted so much to share her problems and to be her friend, but he didn't know what to say. He stopped, and the stars faded behind the clouds, and the wind seemed to sigh from her lips.

"Will you believe me?" "What do you want me to believe?" he replied thoughtfully. "So many things," she whispered, "that no one else will believe." "My name is Thomas," he offered meekly as he extended his hand in

friendship to the stranger.

"Don't try to touch me!" she screamed. "I'm warning you, you'll be sorry if..."

"Don't worry," he assured her, "I only want to help you, if I can.

Nothing more."

"I told him I didn't want to see him anymore, but he wouldn't listen! He kept following me! Then one night, he was waiting for me in the park when I was on my way home from work! I tried to run, but he grabbed me and dragged me into the woods!"

"He raped you?"

"Yes..." she answered solemnly after a long hesitation.

She looked up into his eyes as if to say, "Will you believe me, Thomas?"

After pausing for a moment, she continued, "I didn't know what to do. I was so ashamed. I didn't want to tell anyone, and I didn't see Mark anymore after that night. I just wanted to forget all about it, but not long afterward, I found out I was pregnant. When I finally did tell my parents, they didn't believe that Mark had raped me. They slammed the door in my face and said they never wanted to see me again. Two weeks later, their house caught fire, and the firemen couldn't get to them in time to save them, and now, I'll never be able to see them again, and I'll never have another chance to make them believe me."

Thomas listened intently to her sad story and wanted so much to console her as he searched for the words to make her believe that everything would be all right.

"And when the baby died in her sleep, the doctor said it was my fault!" Her lips stiffened as she spoke, and despite the emotion in her voice, her eyes remained remarkably free of tears. She took his hand and leaned against him seductively, planting a wet kiss on his mouth. Once again, she looked up at him with her sad, beautiful eyes and said, "Do you believe me?"

His heartbeat grew faster and a sudden grip of fear fell upon him as he watched her eyes turn cold and her lips part in a sullen grin.

“And several weeks later,” she continued, “when Mark was killed by a hit-and-run driver, all of my friends turned against me. They said it was a shame that no one could prove I was driving the car. So you see, no one will ever believe me.”

His heart was ready to explode when he turned on his heel to run, but her blade caught him under the right rib cage, and he fell face first onto the stone pavement.

She turned him over and daintily placed the blade directly under his Adam’s apple. She giggled for a moment and began to suck her thumb as she spoke to him in the voice of a little girl.

“No one believed I didn’t kill Mommy and Daddy. No one believed I didn’t kill the little baby. No one believed I didn’t kill Mark, and no one will believe I didn’t kill you....”



A Shortcut Through The Woods

The basketball game had gone into double overtime. Mason's only hope to meet his wife, Linda, at Toro Loco for margaritas at six-thirty was to take the short cut through the woods. This would save about thirty minutes. He might even have time for a quick shower if he walked fast. He tried calling Linda on his cell, but she hadn't answered. He left a message he might be late.

He'd caught a ride to the high school with Carlos, a friend who worked in the mailroom. Unfortunately, Carlos couldn't stay when the game went into overtime, but Mason didn't give it a second thought. He didn't mind the long walk home. He'd burn more calories and still have plenty of time to get to Toro Loco before Linda, that is, until the game went into double overtime.

He found the beaten path he'd walked many times as a teenager, which seemed like a long time ago now that he had children of his own. He guessed it would be about a mile to his house taking the shortcut.

It got dark early this time of year. The cloudy December day with no stars and no moon made the forest seem a lot

more eerie than the times he walked here with Linda on Sunday afternoons. If he remembered correctly and had found the right path, the picnic tables where they took the kids last summer should be just a little further to the right.

Suddenly, he heard a gunshot. The reverberation in his ears told him the shooter was extremely close. Thinking about the black clothes he wore made him feel extremely vulnerable in the darkness. Even with the aura of suburban streetlights in the distance beyond the woods, he couldn't see anything moving in any direction. He doubted anyone could see him, particularly, dressed in black from head to toe.

He thought of shouting out to the nutcase that must be illegally hunting in this residential neighborhood, but the hefty fine made him think something other than hunting could be in play. Hearing the snap of a twig ahead of him, he dove behind the cover of a fallen tree. Something felt nasty in the leaves, but he dared not make a sound. In seconds, he heard voices approaching. In the darkness, he made out two men standing about fifteen feet in front of him; one lit a cigarette. The flame illuminated his face.

"Good Lord!" he thought. "I know this man. It's Tom Sullivan, a bartender at Clyde's in South Orange. My son rides the same school bus as his son."

Mason felt foolish diving into the pile of leaves for no reason until the next words from the two men rang as clear as a bell.

"Is he dead?" The non-smoker asked.

"Right between the eyes. He never knew what hit him," Sullivan said coldly.

"Do you think someone heard the shot?"

"Who knows? Someone probably heard something, but in these deep woods, they may not know what direction it came from. They might think it was just a backfire. No one came the other times."

"That's right. No one even came when we shot the second guy three times when he tried to run. Are we going to leave the body out here like before?"

"Sure. Let the animals have a feast. I don't want to mess up my trunk. Let's drag him behind this trusty old log and

cover him with leaves like the others."

Mason trembled with fear, terrified they may find him if they came closer.

"I'll bet the picnickers will find them next summer," the non-smoker said.

"I doubt it. There won't be anything left but bones by then."

Mason lie as silently as he could, not moving a muscle. He smelled something dead under his nose in the pile of leaves. In his haste to find cover, he had plopped down on something grisly and put his fist through the putrefying remains of a dead thing, rotting and reeking to high heaven. Most likely, it was one of the bodies the killers had left here before.

"You didn't believe me when I told you how easy it would be to roll the big money winners at Winky's on Friday nights," Sullivan said. "Hit 'em with the stun gun in the parking lot and push 'em into the van. They're all good for at least five grand a pop."

"It's been easy money so far. I can't believe the cops haven't caught on by now."

"Patience is the key. We never make a move on a regular; only the ones we don't know, who come from out of town and get lucky."

"Until they get to the parking lot, huh Tom?"

When Mason thought of his cell phone in his pants pocket that could ring any moment, his heart pounded so hard in his chest he thought the men would hear it. Linda would be ordering her first margarita soon and was sure to call to check on him. If she did, his life would be over. He couldn't chance turning off the cell because it played *2001-A Space Odyssey* when it powered off. A few seconds passed, and neither of the men said anything, but he didn't have the nerve to make a run for it.

He heard them cursing when they returned, dragging a large mass down the path on the opposite side from his hiding place. "Damn it! This lowlife weighs a ton," Sullivan shouted huffing and puffing. "We put the other two on the other side of the log. Let's start a graveyard on this side."

The two of them heaved the heavy mass to the ground, gathered armfuls of leaves, and covered the fresh corpse. They also broke some dead limbs off the fallen tree and placed them on top of the leaves to keep them from blowing away.

"Time for a brew. I'm really parched after all this exercise, and the money's burning a hole in my wallet," Sullivan said jubilantly.

"I'll say," the non-smoker groaned in agreement.

Mason heaved a silent sigh of relief when the men started to move toward the path that led to the picnic tables and their car.

Suddenly, the woods lit up with the beams of two extremely bright flashlights, and Mason heard a new voice call out, "Police! Put your hands in the air so we can see them!"

Sullivan and the other man stood still with their flashlights pointing toward the ground.

The two officers approached with revolvers aimed at the two men. The same officer spoke again, "Did you hear me? Put your hands in the air so we can see them, and don't make any fast moves. Did either of you fire the shots we heard?"

"No sir... uh officers," Sullivan said, raising his hands and flashlight above his head. "We didn't fire any shots. We're unarmed."

"Is that your car parked next to the picnic tables?"

"Yes, it is," Sullivan said as his accomplice raised his hands and flashlight above his head.

Then Mason's cell phone exploded with the opening riff of Jimmy Buffet's classic, "Margaritaville". All four faces, two flashlights, and the policemen's guns turned toward the music coming from behind the fallen tree.

"Who's there?" The first policemen called out.

Mason arose from the pile of leaves, put his hands over his head, and said, "I'm Mason Kutz. I dove for the cover of the leaves when I heard the shot. I was afraid the shooter might think I was a deer and take another shot." He turned off his cell phone at the part where Jimmy Buffet had cut his heel on a pop-top and had to cruise on back home.

Realizing this distraction as their best chance to catch

the officers by surprise, Sullivan went for his gun and took a shot at the first officer. The second officer saw the fast movement and opened fire on him at the same moment.

In the beam of a flashlight that had fallen to the ground, Mason saw part of the lead officer's head disintegrate just after he fired a shot at Sullivan's accomplice who had simultaneously unleashed a Bowie knife toward the second officer. Incredibly, in one motion, Mason watched all four men topple to the ground. Their flashlights rolled away into the leaves.

Mason stood in shock with a spray of blood splatter across his right cheek and arm. All motion before him had ceased after the crossfire had ended. His ears rang, and the forest became deathly still. In the beams of the four flashlights strewn upon the ground, Mason looked for something to move, cry out, or take a shot at him. To his relief, everything around him remained in a state of surreal, suspended animation.

He picked up the closest flashlight and pointed it in the direction of the two murderers. Sullivan's had two bullet wounds in his chest and blood had pooled in the leaves around him. The other man reminded him of a Cyclops with the large hole in the center of his forehead. His blank, open eyes stared into what had become a starry night.

Mason stood there in the aftermath of the bloodbath, happy to be alive. He reached for his cell to call 911 and then Linda, but couldn't find it. He returned to the area where he'd turned it off and searched the grisly leaves until the stench became too great to continue. He started toward the picnic tables in hopes he could communicate with someone with the radio in the police car he assumed would be in the adjacent parking lot.

Suddenly, a bright light lit up the sky that was so intense he thought his eyes might burn out of his skull. Finding himself paralyzed where he stood, he began to levitate into the air in an encapsulated beam of white light. In seconds, he rose far above the forest. The Town of South Orange and the surrounding communities were getting smaller and smaller. In a flash, a mammoth circular object appeared from out of

nowhere and floated above him. He heard a whirring sound and saw an opening form in its underbelly. He continued to rise until he was entirely inside the craft, and the round opening below him whooshed closed.

Looking around the interior, he saw hundreds of strange beings that were obviously not of this earth. His head began to spin as several aliens hoisted him on a gurney. A sudden mental lightning bolt made him pass out.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself on an operating table. His arms, legs, and head were connected to hundreds of tubes that led into various machines with flashing monitors. Strangely, he felt no inclination to try and stop the aliens from having their way with him. His mind felt as if it had been drained of knowledge, then magically refilled with information far more fascinating than anything he'd learned on earth. His will was no longer his own. He had to answer every question and respond to every command. In spite of this dominance, he felt calm and had no fear.

* * *

The next morning, Mason found himself on the outskirts of the woods adjacent to his housing development. As he walked toward his home, he noticed all of his senses were much more acute than they had been before the abduction. Feeling more invigorated than ever before, he sensed he had undergone significant bodily modifications that remained hidden under his black sweatshirt and pants. In his lower abdomen, he could feel two more orifices than he'd had before the abduction. He also discovered he could make his tongue touch the ground if he tried. He still had no idea what these changes meant and what the future held in store. All he knew was he was alive, and the four men he'd encountered in the woods were stone cold dead. Despite what the aliens had done to him or what they expected him to do for them, he preferred being alive. At least, for now.

When he opened the front door of his house, Linda screamed from the sofa in the family room, "Where the fuck have you been? I waited for you for three hours. You're so lucky that the guys at the bar didn't take advantage of me. I

was that drunk."

Mason entered the living room and sat on the loveseat across from her and said nothing.

"Let's hear it, bozo. Did you find a bodacious babe with gigantic boobs on your way home? I'll bet...."

Like a bolt of lightning, Mason's tongue shot from his mouth across the coffee table separating them into hers and ended Linda's rant. Her eyes rolled up into her head, and she started to suck.

"You know, honey, I think you're gonna really like these extra orifices and the variety of plug-ins you can choose after your makeover," Mason said as a long tail with fingers slithered from behind his back and fastened on the zipper of Linda's jeans and pulled it down.



The Good Old Days

Her limbs ached with cold as she tossed beneath a mound of multicolored quilts and heavy woolen blankets. A little girl named Nancy, consumed with pneumonia, trembled violently with chills and fever. Charles and Barbara, Nancy's parents, sat in two chairs on each side of the bed. Both were praying for a miracle as the blizzard raged outside.

It was Christmas Eve and the snowflakes were pelting the windowpane like buckshot. Nancy's eyes were half open as she tried to find a little joy from the Christmas tree with its pretty decorations. The flickering light of the fireplace and oil lanterns cast a festive glow on the tiny glass balls hanging from the tree. The scent of pine was heavy in the air. A big red stocking dangled from a rusty spike protruding from the oaken mantle.

Far off, a lone traveler inched his way toward the cabin in a squeaky, dilapidated horse and buggy. His loud barking commands to the old mare were no more than a whisper in the storm. Suddenly, the front wheel of the buggy slid into a drift spilling the doctor into a snow bank. The cranky, befuddled old sawbones shook his fist at the sky and kicked

the apathetic cedar standing at the side of the road. The mare whinnied as the doctor stumbled forward in the drifts in search of his black bag that had also tumbled from the buggy.

Time passed slowly. Barbara sobbed and continued to check Nancy's fever, which was alarmingly high. Finally after hours of hoping and praying, they heard a knock on the big oaken door. Barbara rushed to the door and ushered the doctor to Nancy's bedside. A cold and trembling grizzled hand touched the fevered child's forehead. A melancholy crept into his eyes as he reached for her wrist to check her pulse rate. The doctor administered a medication to her chest to help her breathe and placed some snow wrapped in a towel on her forehead to reduce the fever. Two hours later, the little girl gasped once and died. She looked like an angel lying next to the Christmas tree.

"Sorry, Barbara, but there's nothing I could do. She's gone." He raised the woolen blanket over the little girl's tender eyes as Barbara threw herself upon her and wept uncontrollably. Charles took his wife's hand and tried to console her.

"It's a God's sin when little angels like Nancy have to die from pneumonia, but we still don't know how to cure this awful disease. Hopefully, the day will come when we'll find the cure."

They buried Nancy in the meadow she'd loved so much in life. Every person who walked away from the grave said a silent prayer for the future.

* * *

A century passed...

"Yeah, Charlie, those were the good old days. People were happier than today. Remember the good times we had Christmas caroling. Together... laughing...full of life... genuinely happy, not like today. Seems like spirits tuckered out when inflation went up. New fangled methods are what done us in. Look at today's sawbones, hacking away at a person for all he's worth. It's a God's sin."

If only they knew what the good old days had cost a little girl named Nancy and so many others. But that was so long

ago. The grave is gone, and so are the memories and the sorrows of that futile night. All that remains is the forgetfulness of those who speak so fondly of the good old days.

Is there any doubt we are living in the best of times?



Twenty-five Years

The phone rang at three o'clock in the morning. Richard opened his eyes and peered blurrily at the clock on the end table.

"Jesus!" he thought. "When someone calls at this hour, it's either trouble or the wrong number."

Picking up the phone, he looked at the caller ID and heard the answering machine attempt to pronounce the name of the person calling. It sounded like gibberish."

"Hello," he said weakly.

"Richard, is that you?" the voice asked.

"Yes," he said trying to place the voice that seemed more than familiar.

"Can you guess, old buddy?"

"Hoover?"

"I'm impressed, but we were really good friends twenty-five years ago."

"It's good to hear from you, but do you realize it's three o'clock in the morning? My wife has to get up to go to work in two hours.

"I'm truly sorry, Rich, but twenty-five years ago, we made

a pact that if one of the three of us was in trouble, no matter what time of the day or night, we would be there for each other. I just wanted to see if you were a man of your word.”

Richard remembered the time Bill Hoover had rescued him when he ran out of gas on the Fourteenth Street Bridge going into DC, and said, “Hey, Billy. I’ve been lying here waiting for your call all these years. I am a man of my word. Where are you?”

“I’m at the only phone booth on Route 1 at the MacDonald’s just north of where the old Mount Vernon Drive-In used to be. I’m sure you remember the drive-in or at least you should; you got a lot of tail there.” Hoover chuckled as a car sped by on Route 1.

“I remember both places very well. That MacDonalds was the first one I ever saw. Hamburgers cost fifteen cents back then.”

“My wallet has been stolen, and I left my cell in the car, which the bastards stole after they mugged me,” Hoover groaned.

“Are you hurt?”

“On a scale of one to ten, I’m about a five. I’m pretty beat up, but I don’t think any bones are broken.”

“It sounds like you should be calling 911. You need to file a report and get some medical attention,” Richard suggested, scratching his brow.

“I have an interview in the morning for an important job. I’ve been waiting for it for four weeks, and I can’t afford the time it takes to fill out police reports. It would take at least six hours for some nurse to put a bandage on a few cuts if I go to the emergency room. Can you help me? It’s payback time. I really need you. I wouldn’t have called if I didn’t.”

“Settle down, Hoover. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Oh, by the way, how will I recognize you? We probably don’t look the same.”

“I’ll be the bald headed guy with the muscles at the telephone booth. A lot of people say I look like Mr. Clean. How about you?”

Richard thought for a moment, and then said, “I look like a young Sean Connery in the movie, *Entrapment*. Did you see

it?”

“You mean the one he played a cat burglar with Catherine Zeta Jones?”

“That’s the one.”

“Do you expect me to believe a country bumpkin like you could pass for Sean Connery playing a cat burglar? Do you have a sophisticated beard and moustache?”

“I sure do, Hoover. In fact, maybe I am a cat burglar. It’s been twenty-five years.”

Hanging up the phone, Richard put on some clothes and drove toward Route 1 on Old Keene Mill Road.

He couldn’t believe he was following through on the pact Bill Hoover, Jim Green, and himself had made at the Chinese Restaurant at the Seminary Road Bowling Alley so many years ago. So much could have changed. He thought of turning around and not meeting Hoover, but somehow their old friendship wouldn’t let him.

As he approached MacDonald’s, he spotted a tall man with a Yul Brynner hairdo leaning against a pole with a small sign that said telephone. He pulled up and lowered the window.

“Hey, Hoover, you old douche bag. How’s it hanging?”

“I’ve had better days,” he said while limping around to the passenger side of the car and getting in.

After taking a long look at him in the semi shadows of the parking lot as he pulled onto Route 1, Richard said, “Well, I have to say, I never would have recognized you. Your appearance is totally different. Where to?”

“You can drop me at Southern Towers on 95. I need to get cleaned up for my interview tomorrow morning,” Hoover said, wincing as he fumbled for his seat belt.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drop you at the emergency room? Your face is pretty swollen, and there’s a large bump on your head.”

Hoover pulled down the visor and looked at his eye turning black in the mirror. “If you think I look bad, you should see the other guy.”

“What do you mean? You said a bunch of thugs mugged you.”

"Well, it wasn't quite like that. I had to tell you that bullshit to get you over here. Me and another guy had a disagreement over a topless dancer in a strip joint about half a mile north of here."

"What happened to your car?"

"I don't have any wheels at the moment. The bank repossessed my Mustang a few weeks ago."

Richard pulled off the highway into a Wendy's parking lot. He turned and looked at Hoover in disbelief. "So everything you told me on the phone was bullshit. I guess some things never change."

"I made up most of it. The main reason I called was the pact we made twenty-five years ago. Just like you needed my help when you ran out of gas on the bridge, I needed your help to get me out of a jam now."

Richard looked at Hoover, who was looking at him with the same sorrowful eyes he remembered from when they were teenagers. He hoped their relationship would end after this encounter.

"Look. I hurt my leg when I fell in the parking lot. It may be broken, and I don't own a cell phone. You were the only one I could think to call for help."

"How'd you get my number?"

"I called information, and there was only one other Geegenzack in Northern Virginia, and I knew your middle initial was Z."

Suddenly two police cars with flashing lights and sirens wailing pulled behind Richard's Nissan." A voice from a loud speaker said, "Step out of the car with your hands in the air. Don't make any sudden movements. This will be your only warning."

"Sorry, old buddy," Hoover said as he pulled a gun from behind his back. I thought we were in the clear by the time you pulled into the MacDonalds, but I guess they were just waiting for backup."

"Hoover! What the hell have you gotten me into?"

"I forgot to mention I robbed the 7-11 next door. The damn slope heads only had thirty-five dollars in the till. I never suspected anyone would risk his life for chump change like

that. Was I surprised when I reached for the cash and got hit upside the head with a baseball bat? When he raised the bat to go for the home run, I had to waste the Chink."

"You killed him?" Richard stared at him in disbelief.

"I not entirely sure, but there was a lot of blood. He didn't look so good with part of his skull missing. And then a woman came out of nowhere and grazed my forehead with a lucky shot before I could get out the door. Dazed by the blow to the head, it was all I could do to make it across Route 1. That was when I tripped over the curb and landed hard on the pavement. I heard something snap when I went down."

"Get out of the car with your hands in the air! This is your last chance, before we open fire," came the voice from the loudspeaker.

Richard threw open the driver's door.

"What are you doing?" Hoover asked dumbfounded.

"I'm getting out of the car with my hands in the air."

Hoover grabbed him screaming, "You can't do that. Without you as a hostage, they're gonna kill me." Hoover pointed the gun at Richard's head. "You see, old buddy, I can't go back to the slammer, my asshole can't take any more abuse."

"The officer just said this was our last chance to turn ourselves in before they start shooting."

"They won't fire on an upstanding citizen like you as a hostage. They've already run your plates by now and know everything there is to know about you. What do you have? A couple of parking tickets on your record? You were the most honest guy I ever knew."

Richard's forehead crinkled, and then he smoothed his Sean Connery goatee with a sophisticated flair and said, "I told you on the phone I could be a cat burglar after twenty-five years."

"But you were just kidding, weren't you?"

"You should have called Jim Green to save you if you were looking for an honest man. I have a record a mile long. I just got out of Rikers Island three months ago after a five year stretch."

"What about your wife who goes to work at five o'clock?"

“Sorry, Hoover. I made up that lie to get rid of you. I never had enough time for women. I spent too much time in the slammer. In fact, after years of the inmates using my backside as a toilet, I discovered I might have turned gay somewhere along the way.”

“So what you’re really telling me is we’re fucked. They know we’re both convicted felons, and now I’m also a murderer, and I’m armed and dangerous. If they don’t give me the needle, the cons are going to rip me a new asshole every day for the rest of my life.”

Hoover jumped from the car and opened fire on the two police cars with their headlights pointed toward Richard’s car. The policemen standing behind three other police vehicles opened fire on him.

Richard witnessed the incredible carnage that followed. A barrage of bullets ravaged Hoover’s body. He lurched across the parking lot like a puppet on a string. With more holes than a pincushion, his blood sprayed the parked cars and the pavement until he fell to the ground in a grisly heap. What he’d just witnessed first hand reminded him of the final scene from *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Richard eased out of the car with his arms raised as several policemen surrounded him.

After a pause, one of the officers approached him with his gun at the ready and asked, “Why did you pick up the perp in the parking lot?”

Richard told him about the pact he’d made with his three friends twenty-five years ago, and then added, “Hoover came to my rescue when I ran out of gas on the Fourteenth Street Bridge in 1985. He chose tonight for me to help him.”

The officer wrote what Richard said on his pad and looked at him as if he’d lost his mind.

Only Richard and his wife attended Bill Hoover’s funeral. Jim Green, his other friend who’d made the pact had been killed in a traffic altercation many years before. As he threw a handful of dirt on the casket, he didn’t regret that he hadn’t been entirely truthful to Hoover. He’d never been in the slammer and had been married to the same woman for twenty-three years.

The only thing that was true was the part about his being a cat burglar. But that's another story.



Hangman's Overlook

Jack Harner could not believe the number of shows on the SyFi Channel that related to the supernatural and haunted houses. He was a scam artist who had always placed ghosts on the same list as the Tooth Fairy, Santa Claus, and the Easter Bunny until he researched the topic on the Internet. When he learned that more than 50 percent of people in the United States believe in “things that go bump in the night,” he saw a new opportunity to make some easy money.

Wherever he went from that day forward, he made it a point to refute the existence of ghosts, and if anyone took the bait, he would challenge them to a wager. Since he'd come up

with the idea four months ago, he had suckered one or more people into a bet and walked away with money in his pocket eleven times. His winnings to date were \$12,525.

To win his bets, he had spent the night in six haunted houses, four graveyards, and one abandoned mental hospital.

To expand his operation further, he began to search the Internet for any reports of supernatural activity or strange occurrences in towns where the potential wager would yield more than the cost of transportation and expenses to that location.

A recent story in the Daily News Record, which was the Harrisonburg paper, recounted a series of mysterious disappearances of several townspeople over a number of years at a supposedly haunted place called "Hangman's Overlook." The article stated that during the Civil War, the Union Army had captured a party of Confederate soldiers and hanged them at the top of a cliff that overlooked a large part of the Shenandoah Valley. Jack saw this as an excellent opportunity for wagering and was not daunted by the 200-mile trip.

Jack was so excited by the article; he invited Ed Rhodes, an old army buddy who was down on his luck, to join him in the scam to recruit patsies. Ed, who lived in Roanoke, was to receive 25 percent of the profits and a round-trip train ticket to Harrisonburg for his assistance.

After driving into town at about 8:30 in the morning, Jack went to the local eatery, Lloyd's Steakhouse, to wait for Ed, who was arriving at about 8:45 on the train.

After he had nursed several cups of coffee, he saw Ed come in and take a seat at the bar with a copy of the newspaper. While Ed was waiting for his breakfast to be served, he started reading the story aloud to the waitress about the disappearances at the overlook. He read so loud that everyone at the adjoining tables could hear what he was saying and were particularly interested since the topic had received so much media attention.

"A young couple, Curtis Barb and Bonnie Tayman, went to the overlook to park on March eighteenth," Ed recounted as he stirred his cup of coffee. "They were never heard from

again. The sheriff and his volunteers combed the area for a week, and now a month later, no trace of the couple has been found.”

“Me and my hubby, Homer, used to go up there and park in our courtin’ days,” the little blonde waitress remembered. “It sure was a spooky place all right. The wind used to howl something awful.”

Ed cited five other instances from the local paper’s story where other men and women had told their friends that they were headed for the overlook and were never heard from again.

Jack roared with laughter at Ed’s account and said for every one to hear, “There no such thing as ghosts and nothing supernatural was responsible for what happened to those people. Only a fool would say a ghost was responsible.”

Jack eyed the patsies as he waited for Ed to start the script he’d emailed to him the night before. He wondered how realistically he would deliver the lines.

“Have you ever been to the overlook yourself?” Ed said to Jack, pretending they were strangers.

“No, I’m just a traveler who stopped by for a cup of coffee and some breakfast. I don’t even know where Hangman’s Overlook is. I only know that people who believe in ghosts are idiots.”

Some of the patrons glared at Jack with a look of fire and brimstone.

“I challenge you to go up there at midnight and stand where those soldiers were hanged. I’ve been there, and I can tell you there’s something evil about the place,” Ed said eerily.

“Bullshit!” Jack bellowed.

Ed looked at him in mock disbelief and continued, “It gives me the creeps just thinking about how the trees look up there. The sound of the wind blowing across the mountain is like nothing I’ve ever heard. I remember the strange sounds that came from the bushes and the rocks that made my blood run cold. A pack of something was shrieking and growling.”

“What do you mean ‘something’?” What kind of animal was it?” Jack inquired sarcastically.

“That’s what I mean. It didn’t sound like any animal I

know of in these parts. Whatever it was, it wasn't human."

Jack finally made his play to pick up some extra cash. "I think your story is bullshit. If you give me two hundred dollars, I'll spend the entire night at the overlook."

"I'll make the wager, but I won't return to the overlook," Ed said solemnly.

"Are there any takers on my bet to spend all night at the overlook?"

A man from a table in the corner scrambled up to the counter and put \$200 on the bar and said, "You're on. Me and the boys are going in."

After several others came to the counter with various amounts of money, Jack agreed to wager \$1,000 to spend the night at Hangman's Overlook. His ploy had worked like a charm.

The next evening, a small party of spectators in a station wagon and an El Camino met Jack at the overlook as the sun was going down. The small group took their places around the cars and two benches that were located in a picnic area a safe distance from the overlook and started drinking beer. Several had brought binoculars to watch Jack until the sun was completely down. One had night-vision glasses—the kind used on Ghost Hunters on the SyFi Network—to be sure he didn't sneak away before daybreak. There were a few rifles leaning against the cars and a handgun on the fender.

After a time, the wind began to howl like a pack of wolves, and Jack heard strange sounds coming from the terrain that was pitch black. He turned on his flashlight and lit a cigarette to settle his nerves.

Jack felt very confident that he was in no danger from the supernatural, but he was a little antsy about the possibility of a psychopath or a wild animal lurking about in the bushes. After all, a number of people had actually disappeared at the overlook according to the article. He felt relieved that he was not alone, and there were seven armed men watching him at a safe distance.

After an hour had passed, Jack made a campfire to lessen the chill of the howling wind. At about midnight he started dancing and singing and carrying on around the

campfire like a wild Indian. As the night wore on, the group of spectators were becoming more and more pissed that they were all going to lose their money in the morning. All the scary things that Ed Rhodes had talked about were not happening. By about 4:00, most of the men were shitfaced and dozing and were no longer paying attention to what Jack was doing.

At around 5:30 a.m., the first glint of dawn colored the horizon. Jack was dying for a cigarette and left the overlook and went out to where the two cars were parked. As he approached, he became very uneasy since there was not a sound coming from either car.

He turned on his flashlight and saw blood splattered across the picnic benches and puddles of blood standing in little ditches all around the two cars. There were empty beer cans, McDonald's bags, and spent cigarette butts littering the area around the cars and the blood splatter, but no people.

Jack's eyes flitted to and fro in case the murderers were planning to waste him next, when his eyes fell upon a hodgepodge of bloody bodies piled in the bed of the El Camino. He saw a yellow raincoat on the ground splattered with blood and a machete leaning against the fender. He was about to make a run for it to his car, when he heard a familiar voice from the open window of the second car.

"We're splitting up the money now," Ed Rhodes shouted as he opened the car door and looked at Jack. "We'll have your share shortly."

With his mouth agape, Jack stood in shock surveying the dead bodies, not understanding what had transpired. He saw another man in the car looking toward him as Ed counted a group of bills in the glow of the ceiling light. The headlights of the car came on and shone across the eerie landscape of the overlook.

Momentarily, Ed left the station wagon and joined Jack. He was grinning from ear to ear as he started to explain. "I met this guy on the train to Harrisonburg, and I told him about the wager. He said he had a better idea on how to make a lot more money than \$800. he was right. These seven farmers had a grand total of \$2,100 in their pockets. And get this; he even knows where there's a swamp nearby to ditch the cars

and the bodies.”

“You stupid bastard,” Jack said as he stared into the muzzle of the twelve-gauge shotgun the stranger was pointing at them.



The Dark Return

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The ring. The crowd. The blood. The count.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Flashes of explosions filled the night as Ray's mind began to spin and the dream returned as soldiers darted about and machine guns roared.

The painful memories of his last fight and the war continued to haunt him with a vengeance as he pondered the future.

Ray Davis, the heavyweight champion of the world, had discarded fame and fortune at the pinnacle of his career to

serve his country in Desert Storm. Unfortunately, the unselfish act had backfired when he had run away on the field of battle and received a dishonorable discharge for cowardice from the army.

It was all a misunderstanding. He wasn't a coward. He knew what no one else knew. The dream. The horrible taunting nightmare was the reason he had run away. The eyes. They were what haunted his every moment. He had recurring dreams that would come upon him without warning any time of the day or night since the fight with Joey Ramos. Joey, who had been his best friend all through high school, had become his rival for the heavyweight championship. They had gone through everything together personally and professionally. Ray had been best man at Joey's wedding only a month before the fatal night.

A vicious uppercut had ended Joey's quest for the championship and his life. Ray could still see his open eyes staring up at him from the canvas. These were the eyes that wouldn't let him forget.

He was back home now, but his war was not over. It was just beginning. He was branded a coward, and nothing in life mattered but rising above the humiliation and regaining his former dignity, not only as a boxer, but also as a man.

He began training with a fury that he'd never known before. He ran and sparred from morning to night until his body was rippling with pure muscle. After seven fights, he had garnered seven more victories; five were won by a knockout. He was undefeated in forty bouts in his career with thirty-four knockouts.

Ray had easily regained his stature as a champion in the ring, but he was still a coward in the minds of the people, who booed him mercilessly from the moment he entered the ring until he returned to the dressing room.

He decided to have one more fight. Even before he enlisted to go to Desert Storm, achieving the belt of the heavyweight champion of the world was no longer important. Joey's death had shattered all his hopes and dreams that fatal night. The only thing that mattered now was removing his brand of a coward in the eyes of his former fans. No matter

how many fights he won, he knew they would never forgive him for running away on the field of battle. He pondered his fate and what he must do to make himself a hero once again in their eyes.

Ruefully, he planned the sacrifices he thought were necessary to achieve redemption both in and out of the ring.

Weeks vanished into time, and the long awaited match was only minutes away. The crowd was mixed with catcalls and boos as he left his dressing room and headed toward the ring. The unforgiving crowd grew louder as he stepped through the ropes. He looked out into the expanse of the arena and the teeming spectators and saw one fan waving from an empty bank of seats in the upper deck of the arena. Ray returned the wave as a tear rolled down his cheek.

He paced his corner. The contender, Tony Bastille, glared at him with the eye of the tiger, but Ray's cold stare met the challenger's with a fury he'd never seen before from any opponent.

From the first bell, the two warriors battered each other relentlessly for six rounds. The judges had the bout even on all three scorecards.

In the middle of the seventh round, Ray unleashed a vicious left hook followed by a pile-driving right cross that sent Bastille to the deck. He was unconscious and not moving for part of the referee's count to ten, but Ray was happy to see him trying to stand as the announcer made his way into the ring after he was counted out.

The crowd was booing as Ray stood in the middle of the ring and the announcer began to declare the winner of the contest. As the referee lifted Ray's arm in victory, a shot rang out from the upper deck of the arena. The bullet struck Ray right between the eyes and splattered the referee and the announcer with his blood and gore. Ray's body hurtled backward from the impact of the shot and eerily took the shape of Jesus without the cross on the canvas.

The booing ceased and a hush fell over the arena as the spectators stood in awe at what they had witnessed. Shortly thereafter, the media, the challenger, and both fighters' handlers rushed into the ring, and a state of chaos prevailed

inside the arena for about forty-five minutes.

Someone draped some towels over Ray's body until the medics arrived with a stretcher and a gurney.

As Ray's body was being removed from the ring, the announcer finally declared that Ray Davis was still the undefeated heavyweight champion of the world.

After a slight pause, the crowd began to clap slowly at first until the applause increased in participation and volume to a thundering standing ovation.



The Stranger

A soldier made a call from a phone booth in the Trenton train station.

"Hello, Dad. I'm home. My tour of duty is finally over. How's Mom?"

"She's fine, and we're all here at the house. I'm making margaritas. It's Friday night and we're ready to party. We can't wait to see you."

"Gee, that's swell. A party, huh? I guess a man's got to get his mind off what's passed and learn how to live again." The soldier hesitated for a moment and said, "Sure, Dad. Let's have a party. It'll be just like the old times."

"Take a cab and get your butt on over here."

"Dad, there's something I need to ask you. I have a

friend who had a bad break and lost his leg in the fight. His mom and dad are dead, and he doesn't have anywhere to go. I was hoping he could take Junior's old room and stay with us."

"Do you mean indefinitely?"

"I haven't thought that far ahead. It's Christmas, and I know how much fun we had as a family this time of year."

"Is he with you now?"

"No, he won't be discharged until next week. I didn't want to spring him on you without getting your approval first."

"I'm sorry, Son, but your mom has been ill and she can't cook and clean like she did before you enlisted, and I'm afraid that, due to the economy, I'm going to be laid off. We're not set up to care for your friend."

"Sure, Dad. I know Mom's been sick lately, and you've been talking about being laid off for the last twenty years. Really, he's been rehabilitated and has been taught to take care of himself. He won't be any trouble, I promise."

"We really don't want a stranger in the house at this point in our lives. It's so awkward to make conversation at the dinner table. Who knows what kind of TV shows he likes. How loud he plays music. I know you want to help your friend, but it's a lot to take on, particularly in light of his disability."

"Trust me, Dad. My friend is so much like me; he won't be a bother at all. He likes all the TV shows we watched before my deployment."

"We want to help, and we'd love to put him up for a few days, maybe even a week, but we don't want to make a long-term commitment. We just don't want a stranger living with us."

"A couple of days. Sure, Dad. I understand. I know he's got to face the world sooner or later. Better sooner than later, I guess."

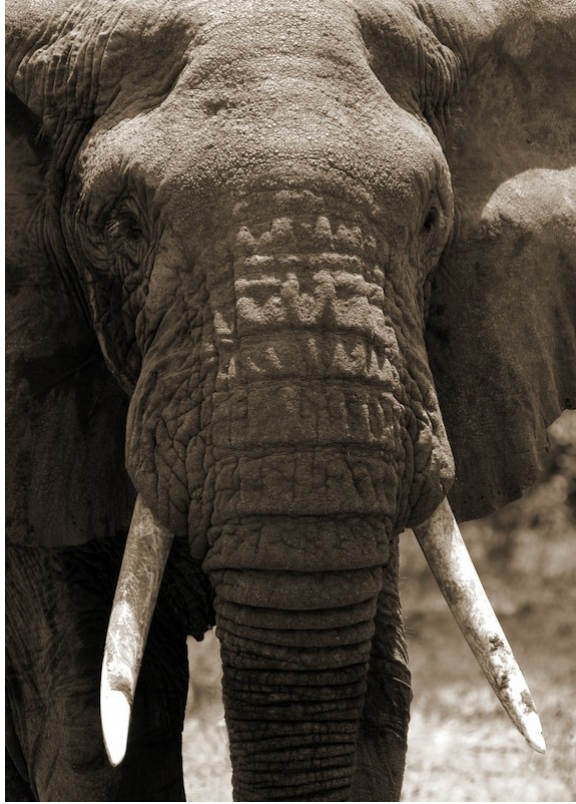
"Are you on your way? The burgers are almost ready."

"Home? I won't be long now, but I need to take care of a few things first. I won't be long. Take care of yourself, and tell Mom I love her. Goodbye."

"Son! Wha—"

The soldier hung up the phone. Tears rolled down the

young man's face as he left the phone booth and moved slowly off into the shadows outside the train station and toward the taxi stand. If only he did have a friend. If only he weren't the stranger who had to learn to face the world... alone.



Paths Of Glory

The tiny orb shattered in midair, and a roar of applause resonated from the crowd. Edwards was an expert in skeet shooting, and this contest was yet again another triumph. he had won top honors in every form of marksmanship.

Edwards was a haughty man and loved to boast about his prowess whenever the opportunity presented itself. Unfortunately, he had never attempted big game hunting, which was the pinnacle of his art. After winning all other feats of marksmanship, this was next on his agenda.

Edwards had been contemplating a safari into the Congo for more than twenty years. In all his dreams, he was a hero. Each venture ended with him being photographed with his

foot atop the carcass of Bengal tiger or an African lion.

He longed to make these dreams a reality. It would be a duel between the brains and the brawn. He thought of gladiators in the Coliseum in Rome, the crowd cheering as they witnessed a clash of titans in the arena of blood and sand. He could see it all now in his mind's eye: the mighty head of a bull elephant fixed in the crosshairs of his British Enfield and the collapse of his prey at his feet, gasping and tossing until the law of the jungle ended the last remnants of its petty existence. He would walk away unscathed, and the splendor of the kill would exalt his name throughout the journals of the modern world. He would be "Edwards the Magnificent, the Great White Hunter."

Finally under the African stars, he lay with the troupe of fifteen he had hired to accompany him on his maiden voyage into the bush. His thoughts drifted to what was certain to happen the next day. Distant tribal drums throbbed in the blackness of the dense jungle. The cries of the beasts of prey increased with the dawn as Edwards and his band left their campfire and sliced their way through the underbrush. Eventually, a ray of light emerged from the dense terrain, and the party looked out upon an expanse of a grassy plain.

Edwards knew this was the battleground he had been dreaming of.

The wind tossed the tall grasses to and fro and made the hunt much more dangerous than he had imagined. He peered into the distance with his rifle at the ready. The sun was hot, and the members of the tribe he had hired grew restless as the day wore on.

Suddenly a maddening shriek roared across the plain, and the thunder of mighty hoofs shook the very earth. Edwards and his band stood motionless as they watched a defiant bull elephant emerge from the underbrush, prodding and heaving its twisted trunk. It was obvious by its appearance that this mighty beast had survived many seasons of battle, as its hide was deeply marked from old wounds and its tusks were disfigured with many combat scars. Edwards was ecstatic; this would be the first animal that would feel his wrath.

He could visualize the mammoth head affixed to the wall in his den as he crept into position.

With his rifle poised to fire, he strode into the field where the male elephant was stomping about with the savage anticipation of challenging another rogue. But instead of finding a formidable member of his own species to do battle with, his eyes fixed on Edwards, the puny man-beast who came ambling slowly but surely toward him. Edwards stopped and surveyed the situation. The mighty elephant stood his ground, shaking his head, seemingly preparing for the optimum moment to charge.

And then with a shattering trumpet blast, the rogue thundered toward Edwards.

Edwards raised his rifle and aimed for the hump right between the elephant's eyes. A torrent of sweat welled in his eyes and blinded him. His hands trembled, and his throat became parched in an instant. The distance between Edwards and the mammoth beast grew less and less. Edwards tried to steady the rifle. The crosshairs shifted to and fro upon the elephant's head. The projecting tusks and the thundering hoofs unnerved his senses. A wild shot missed its mark and careened off a tree to the right of the charging elephant, who was unperturbed by the feeble discharge of the challenger's rifle. The enormous beast's tusks impaled Edwards midsection in an instant as the lower part of his body was crushed underfoot.

The conflict, lasting less than a mere ten seconds, had ended and the result was that Edwards's bloody remains were strewn across a small section of the enormous grassy plain like a drop in the ocean. The hunter was dead, horribly slaughtered by the rogue elephant that knew no master and was oblivious to fear. So it would be until another came to challenge his throne. After the elephant disappeared into the underbrush, the shocked members of Edwards's party who had witnessed the carnage gathered up the remains of their leader on a stretcher.

They buried the pieces of Edwards that they found in a shallow grave and placed his rifle in the ground as a headstone.

There would be no headlines of glory for Edwards; there would be no elegy for his memory. The only trace of Edwards was the rifle that marked his grave, and several of the natives in the party would certainly abscond with that once the sun went down. By morning there would be no trace of Edwards in the ground since what was left of the body would be tonight's nocturnal snack for the jackals.



Turbulence

After winning the lottery for \$32 million, I called my boss and told him where he could stick my vice president position at hemisphere Bank.

I had decided to start celebrating with an around-the-world tour. This had always been an item on my bucket list. My first stopover was San Francisco en route to Hawaii.

Due to a lifelong bout with asthma, I made arrangements for a portable oxygen device to be supplied by the airline for the flight. When I took my seat in first class, the flight attendant hooked me up to the oxygen machine.

I ordered a Martini and started reading the airline travel

magazine. After a half hour elapsed, the plane took off, and once the correct cruising altitude was attained, the fasten-seat-belt light was turned off. The flight was scheduled for seven hours, which I knew would not be pleasant, but I was giddy with the excitement of being a multimillionaire. The reading and the cocktail made me drowsy, so I closed my eyes and started to fantasize about how I would spend my \$32 million.

In the midst of having sex with a harem of buxom beauties on my magic carpet, the plane suddenly hit a violent pocket of turbulence and jolted me awake and back to reality. My seat belt was already fastened when the pilot's voice came over the intercom.

"Please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts; we're in for some turbulence for about fifteen minutes. There's no need for alarm, and we will make every effort to arrive on time."

I could feel the plane accelerating into a higher flight pattern.

Looking around me, I saw the worried faces of the first-class passengers. I looked back into the coach section and saw the majority of those passengers were also visibly shaken by the unexpected turbulence.

The pretty blonde flight attendant noticed my state of alarm and said, "How about another martini to settle your nerves?"

Giving her the thumbs up, I said, "I'm surprised the pilot didn't warn us of the turbulence beforehand. That was quite a jolt. It felt like something hit the plane."

"There's nothing to worry about. It was just an air pocket. The pilot is flying at thirty-four thousand feet, which is higher than normal, to avoid the worst of the storm."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, I heard a loud pop and someone screamed in the coach section. The cabin pressure deflated in an audible whoosh as the oxygen masks fell from above every seat. The man next to me quickly placed the elastic strap around his head and positioned the cup on his face. I removed my portable oxygen mask and placed the dangling yellow cup to my face.

Immediately, I couldn't breathe with the emergency oxygen mask and replaced it with the one I'd been wearing. I looked helplessly at my fellow passengers and watched them gasping for breath like fish out of water. For some reason, they were not getting oxygen from the emergency cups that had been deployed. The cacophony of screams and wails resonated throughout the plane as the passengers struggled to breathe. The blonde flight attendant pounded on the door of the cockpit and then collapsed to the floor.

I looked back into the coach section and saw the passengers slumped across their seats or lying motionless on the floor in heaps. A stream of papers, pillows, and loose objects were being sucked toward a window in the back of the plane that was apparently open to the outside. An eerie mist began to fill the cabin.

I sat motionless with my eyes closed for a few minutes for fear someone would try to steal my oxygen supply. In a short time, all pleas for help ended. I reached forward and felt for a pulse on the passenger sitting in front of me. There was none. I pushed the call button over my seat, but, as I expected, no one was alive to answer it. I concluded that everyone aboard was dead except for the pilots and me. I included the pilots because the plane seemed to be flying normally despite the loss of cabin pressure.

I sat there wondering what to do. The meter on my portable oxygen unit indicated that three-quarters remained in the canister. I estimated that I had about an hour and a half left before I ran out of oxygen. I noticed that the exposed skin of all the first-class passengers had turned pale. Some of the dead bodies were twisted in their seats and staring back at me with blank open eyes.

I looked back into the coach section and saw rows of ashen faces staring forward toward first class. I guessed about 150 passengers were dead. I wondered what was going on in the cockpit. There had been no announcements. The drone of the engines gave no indication of a changing flight pattern, much less any preparation for landing.

I thought about the vast fortune that I'd probably never live to spend and started to cry. The creepy mist that I'd seen

in coach began to seep around me. In a short time, the entire plane was engulfed. The corpses seated around me mercifully disappeared into the fog.

After a few more minutes passed, I stood and groped like a blind man toward the cockpit. I stumbled and fell atop a heap of bodies in the aisle. My hand broke my fall as it fell hard upon the clammy face of a corpse. It felt like my thumb had inadvertently gouged an open eye. I gasped in horror as I bolted forward on a bed of dead bodies. I finally smacked into the cockpit door and slumped beside it. I knocked and then pounded on the door repeatedly and shouted, "I am the only survivor of all the passengers. My portable oxygen supply will run out soon. Can you help me?"

I waited for a reply, but none came. Pounding on the door until my knuckles were raw, I shouted like a madman. Exhausted from the trauma, I put my ear to the door and listened to the dead silence within. Other than the drone of the engines, the entire plane was like a tomb.

If the pilots were alive, they would have answered me. I was no threat to them behind the security door. The only explanation was that the plane was on autopilot and would crash when it ran out of fuel.

Suddenly the roar from the open window in coach stopped. Something must have lodged in the window and plugged the hole, at least for now. Probably some poor bastard had become a human stopper.

Almost immediately, the fog began to dissipate as the cabin pressure began to stabilize. I saw the pallid faces of the corpses seated around me materialize from the fog with their ghastly open eyes. Turning away from the horror, I began to rifle through the cabinets in the refreshment area for a spare oxygen canister. I found some miniature liquor bottles, but no oxygen.

The engines outside continued to drone as I made my way back to a vacant seat. I screwed off the tops of three bottles of Jack Daniels and chugged them. I trembled at the thought of my oxygen running out. I sat there among the first-class corpses to wait for my impending doom. The stench of urine and shit grew heavy in the pressurized cabin. I

readjusted my oxygen nosepiece to block out as much of the foul odor as I could.

I felt a vibration in my shirt pocket, and my cell phone began to ring. I grabbed it and said, "Hello. Who's this?"

"It's Harry. I was sitting here bored out of my mind reviewing loan applications and wondered how the luckiest guy on the planet is doing."

"Harry! Thank God you called. I didn't know I had any reception. Listen carefully before we're cut off. I'm on Monarch flight 1580 to San Francisco, and as far as I can tell everyone is dead except me."

"Rudy, you old prankster. That's the best one you've ever come up with. I've got to hand it to you—"

"Harry! Shut up and listen! This is no joke. A window blew out in the back of the plane, and when the oxygen masks were deployed, they didn't work, and everyone aboard but me died. My portable oxygen supply saved me."

"Who's flying the plane?"

"I believe the plane is on autopilot until it runs out of gas. Stay on the line, but go to another phone and call the FAA. Tell them I'm on medical oxygen and my supply is running out. Give them my cell number. Maybe they can tell me where they keep the spare canisters until they can intercept the plane. I'm desperate. Have you got that?"

I listened for an answer, but the line was dead. There was no service to make another call, and I didn't know how much of what I had said Harry heard.

I thought about what Harry had said about my being the luckiest person in the world and thought I might be. One hundred and fifty people were dead, and I was still alive. Time would tell if my luck would run out.

I heard a metal clank on the underbelly of the plane. A few minutes later, I heard strange sounds and muffled voices from below the coach section. There was no doubt a rescue party was outside trying to breach the underside of the plane. I remembered the way the passengers in the movie *Executive Decision* were rescued from terrorists by joining two airplanes flying at the same speed with a compression interface. Was this movie concoction really possible?

“Thank God!” I thought. “Maybe I will survive after all.”

I left my seat and struggled into the coach section. A fiery outline appeared in the middle of the aisle and a section of the floor was removed, and several men catapulted into the cabin from below.

I shouted for help, and two men struggled past a heap of bodies and stared at me like they were seeing a ghost.

Looking at my portable oxygen unit, one said, “You must be the luckiest person on the planet.”

* * *

A month passed and I decided to visit my sister in West Orange, New Jersey, before resuming my world tour. During that time, I cut out numerous newspaper and magazine articles that referred to me as “the luckiest man alive.” Life was good. Everything was coming up roses.

My lawyer was suing Monarch Airlines for several more million in damages to add to my lottery winnings.

Finally, on September 11, 2001, my sister drove me to the Newark Airport, and I boarded flight 93 to San Francisco.



Tomorrow Is A Long Time

She awoke in a cold sweat. The whisper of a scream seemed to linger in her subconscious. Fear had been her sleeping partner this night, but the nightmare had subsided and she couldn't remember any part of it.

Her eyes fell upon a pink stain on the carpet she had never seen before. There was an eerie silence that hung heavy in the room. She began to tremble and her heart started beating rapidly as her eyes darted from one side of the bedroom to the other, but after a thorough inspection,

everything seemed to be in its place.

Not only was everything in its place, her room was as neat as a pin. Someone had picked up the clutter that was strewn about the room when she had gone to bed. She had never seen her room in this condition. She even thought she detected a lingering smell of furniture polish in the air. How strange for her mother to tidy up her room while she had been asleep. Was it her birthday? Had she done something special to deserve this unexpected surprise?

The bedroom seemed very stuffy, and the glare from the window seemed unnaturally bright for this time of the morning. Time. The word stuck in her mind as she looked to the nightstand for her clock. Incredibly, it was ten after twelve.

What was the matter? She had never overslept this long before. Nothing made any sense. She jumped out of bed and dressed as quickly as she could. She needed answers. There were too many mysteries for one morning.

She assumed that everyone was waiting in the living room to spring the surprise on her. Everyone knew what was happening but her. As she was leaving her room, she saw a card lying on the bureau. It was crumpled and seemed wet to the touch. She opened it and read the words aloud to the silent room: "We offer our sincerest condolences in your time of grief. Signed John and Martha Jonas."

She darted into the living room with expectation, "Mom! Dad! I saw a card on the bureau, and it says someone has died!"

To her surprise, there was no one there. She heard the sound of a car starting up outside in the driveway. She ran to the front door, opened it, and peered out. Her mother and father were pulling out of the driveway. Both were dressed as if they were going to church. She yelled to get their attention, but they didn't hear her. They continued into the street and pulled away. She jumped the steps on the front porch and ran into the street screaming at the top of her lungs, but the green sedan never paused.

She sat down on a bench in front of her neighbors' house and began to sob. Everything was creepy, and the memory of a terrible nightmare she couldn't remember

lingered in her subconscious. She noticed several people walking across the street who went about their business without wondering why she was crying.

She returned home and found a rose petal on the sidewalk that led to the front door. She gripped it tightly and tried to make sense of it all: The card. The roses. Her tidy room. Her mother dressed in black.

Everything pointed to a funeral. But for whom? Why hadn't she been told someone had died, and why was she left out when they went to the wake? She was certainly old enough to attend. It didn't make any sense.

She wiped her tears on her sleeve and proceeded to the next-door neighbors' house to ask if they knew who had died, but they, too, were not at home.

She left their house and started walking. Block after block she pondered the circumstances without resolve. The people passing were faceless; the shop windows downtown passed in a flurry. The world was just the patterns of the sidewalk.

But then a familiar object restored her train of thought. She saw her parents' car parked on the street in front of her. She saw "Springdale Funeral Home" on a sign to the left. She remembered she had been here before when Aunt Rose died. She paused for a moment and went in.

The air of sorrow and mourning sucked her breath away in an instant. It was like she had entered another world. She heard people weeping somewhere within, and an organ was playing music that was so melancholy, it brought tears to her eyes. The interior was dark, and candles were flickering in each shadowed room along the corridor. She heard a minister praying, but couldn't understand the words.

Step by step, she inched forward. The fragrance of many kinds of flowers bombarded her senses and made her feel queasy. She entered a dark room where shadowy people bowed and prayed and sat sobbing around a circle of chairs. She faced the party of mourners and seemed to recognize almost everyone.

With every step toward the casket, the nightmare she couldn't remember returned with a vengeance. She was at her

sweet-sixteen birthday party. She was so happy until the party was over. Afterward, the images returned in a flurry of terror. The man. The window. The knife. The scream. The blood. It all seemed so real, and she remembered every detail.

“No!” she screamed as the tears rolled down her face. “It wasn’t a dream! It was real!”

The casket came into view, and her eyes fell across her own face lying within. Turning away from the horror she had tried so desperately to forget, she saw her mother weeping in a pew a few yards away.

She had been cheated. She was never going to college. She was never going to be married and have children like all the girls she had invited to the sweet-sixteen party. She didn’t want to go into the light that beckoned to her now. She wanted so much to hold on to life a little while longer and stay with the ones who loved her.

But when she looked into her mother’s eyes, there was nothing left to hold on to. They were the eyes of someone who had lost her little girl.



Surprise! Surprise!

Two bodies involved in a head-on collision earlier that week were just delivered to the Morningside Funeral Home. When their Lincoln Town Car collided with a semi carrying steel beams, the young man was decapitated and his fiancé lost the upper right quarter of her face. Both died instantly.

Jane Regan, who was working late, called the owner, Gregory Stickley, to inform him of the delivery.

Gregory, his new wife, Mandy, and her two daughters, Cindy and Sandy, were sitting at a large dining room table when the call came in. A large birthday cake with forty candles had been placed in the middle of the table.

“Can’t you call Henry to take care of this tonight?” Mandy said in exasperation. “It’s your birthday, and we are so looking

forward to the party I planned for you.”

“Darling, I know you’re disappointed, but we can have the party tomorrow night.”

“Day-old cake won’t taste the same, I promise you.”

“Order a new cake if it makes you happy.” Gregory kissed her on the cheek and threw two kisses to Cindy and Sandy as he departed through the door that led to the garage and his Lexus.

When Gregory arrived at the funeral home, Jane was typing correspondence in the office on the first floor.

“When did the accident victims arrive?”

“Larry and Steve wheeled the gurneys into the lab about seven p.m. I called Henry, but couldn’t reach him. I think he said he was going to the movies with Blanch. Do you want me to try again?”

“No, there’s no need. My fortieth birthday party has been ruined tonight, so I may as well let Henry enjoy the rest of his evening. I can get the ball rolling, and Henry can finish up tomorrow.”

Jane looked at Gregory suspiciously, and after weighing his comments concerning Henry, she looked at the calendar on her Rolodex and said, “It really is your birthday...April second...how could I have forgotten?”

“I was about to blow out the candles when you called. Mandy and the kids are really mad at you for breaking up such a lavish affair.”

“You really didn’t need to be here tonight. Henry could have handled it.”

Gregory ignored this comment. “Why are you working overtime?”

“I’m not working overtime,” Jane retorted. “I need to take some personal leave, and I was cleaning out my inbox.”

“Did you call the temp agency?”

“Of course I did. I wouldn’t leave without getting someone to fill in while I’m gone. I would think you would know that by now.”

“Hey, I apologize,” Gregory said as he paced back and forth across the office and poured himself a cup of stale coffee. “Do what you’ve got to do, and come back as soon as

you can. You know I can't get along without you."

This comment rekindled some old emotions for Jane, at least for a split second, but the reality of recent events restored her deep hatred for Gregory almost as fast.

"Look, I'd better get started." Gregory pitched the remnants of the coffee in the trashcan. "As I've indicated in the past. I don't want to be disturbed once I start the embalming process."

Jane looked at him with a sideways glance and reached for her purse from under her desk. She started to straighten a few sticky notes in her daybook as Gregory opened the door that led to the basement. She heard the bolt click before he descended the stairs.

Jane extracted a sealed letter of resignation from her purse and placed it in the middle of her desk. She took one last look around the office and left the building for the last time.

She got into her car and drove to a local restaurant. She requested a quiet table, and the maître d' escorted her to a table toward the back. She pulled her cell phone from her purse and dialed Mandy.

"Oh, hello, Mandy. This is Jane at Morningside. Gregory told me he's feeling really guilty about not celebrating his birthday with you and the kids. After all, forty is a milestone, and it should be special. I suggest you and the kids come over to the office. We can have a surprise party for Gregory here. I don't know if you know this, but Gregory loves surprises."

"Really? The kids will be so excited."

"I left the back door to the basement open for you. I'll be helping Gregory with paperwork, and Henry will be processing the bodies. Just come on in with the cake, and we'll all yell 'surprise' as soon as we see you."

"You don't know how much this means to the kids and me, Jane. Let's have lunch sometime this week. I'd like to get to know you a little better."

"You don't need to thank me. Seeing the look on Gregory's face will be reward enough for me. Don't wait too long before you come. I'm really looking forward to the party."

Jane returned her cell to her purse and started perusing

the menu. She thought a very dry martini would be the perfect drink to celebrate Gregory's birthday.

Mandy pulled around back of the funeral home, as Jane had suggested, and parked the Mercedes next to one of the black hearses. The only lights that were on in the building were in the basement. There was a low drone of rock music throbbing from within.

Mandy shushed the kids and told them to be very quiet, as to not spoil the surprise. She placed the cake on a table on the porch and quickly lit the candles. Cindy and Sally giggled excitedly as Mandy opened the door.

They burst into the lab and screamed merrily, "Surprise! Surprise!"

The threesome was blinded momentarily by the bright fluorescent lights and disoriented by an earsplitting sound of Sam the Sham's great rock classic, "Wooly Bully."

When their eyes adjusted to the lights, Mandy and the kids stood frozen in a state of shock at the sight they would remember until the day they died. Gregory was nude atop the naked female corpse on the embalming table. His hands were squeezing her large breasts in unison with each violent thrust of his hips. His eyes were closed tight in a fit of ecstasy, unaware that Mandy and the kids had entered the room.

The right quarter of the young woman's face was a hollow cavern of gore and the absence of her right cheek gave her exposed teeth a sardonic smile.

Mandy fled with the kids and called the police. The two officers who answered the call also found Gregory in a fit of ecstasy with his eyes closed until they cuffed him.

Gregory committed suicide in the fifth year of his ten-year prison sentence for necrophilia due to a severe case of hemorrhoids.



Life After Death

The man with the white, flowing beard, who had been a prophet during the time of Jesus, looked out on New York City from the expensive penthouse where he now lived. The world's richest man, Rupert Wellington, used a time machine to bring him from the past to the current time. The billionaire had granted the old man his every wish since he stepped from the time pod a month ago. He wasn't a prisoner, but the treatment he'd received, which had been the most lavish imaginable, had curtailed any inclination for him to venture forward into a strange new world. Wellington's generosity was beyond the prophet's wildest dreams, and he liked it.

The prophet called himself Tibor, and right from the start, the billionaire sensed something extraordinary about the old man. He had a mystical glint in his eye. When he looked at something, he seemed to know everything about it. Tibor claimed he knew the secrets of the universe and could foretell the future. Wellington was skeptical at first, but the old man demonstrated unbelievable magic powers during exhaustive

tests administered by a battery of outside consultants. Without the slightest hesitation, his response to questions that had remained unanswered for centuries became a testimony that he truly possessed a sixth sense.

At one of the first sessions, Wellington jokingly said, "OK, Tibor, here's a tough one. Where is Jimmy Hoffa buried?"

Without asking who Jimmy Hoffa was, the old man replied, "He's buried in a block of concrete at a parking lot at Newark Airport."

Wellington remembered Hoffa had been last seen in Bloomfield, Michigan, and Newark seemed like quite a stretch. Nonetheless, thirty minutes later a helicopter landed atop the Manhattan tower, and he accompanied the bearded prophet to a heliport in Newark. A construction crew met them at the airport parking lot. After jack hammering a section of concrete the old man had pointed to, the workmen lifted a skeleton from the rubble, which was later positively identified as Hoffa.

Tibor answered other questions that had previously been inconclusive speculation, such as who had been responsible for the Kennedy assassination in Dallas? What happened to Amelia Earhart? The true identity of Jack the Ripper?

Wellington became even more impressed when Tibor correctly predicted the next World Series and the Super Bowl champions. After presenting a ticket with the winning numbers on Power Ball, gambling establishments and odds makers worldwide barred the prophet from participating in any form of betting. The possibilities of Tibor making him more billions with such magical powers boggled Wellington's mind.

The billionaire decided along with his many enterprises to be the next Merv Griffin and develop several new reality programs with the prophet's participation. The first one he decided to name, *Ask the Prophet*.

In order to make the debut show an extravaganza to bring in the biggest media share in television history, the first question posed would be, "Is there life after death?" This was the question that would undoubtedly generate more worldwide attention and controversy than any other.

Wellington decided to solicit a candidate who had fallen

on hard times. The person chosen would have to agree to put his faith and his life on the line on live TV for the biggest prize in game show history of five million dollars.

As soon as the network announced the new game show, sponsors waited in line to purchase a thirty second commercial. Despite the possibility of dying, millions of believers and atheists sent in applications to participate. Wellington had to bribe a huge number of politicians and corporate executives to allow him to broadcast an actual execution on prime time TV, but it was chump change in the scheme of things.

One of the candidates was a poor man named John Smith, who lived in a small bungalow with his wife and ten children. He had been out of work for six months, and despite pounding the sidewalk and sending out resumes daily, he had no potential job offers. His savings had depleted to the point the bank would soon foreclose on his house. Having exercised every measure available to keep his small home, he knew he would soon be living in his derelict car. When this eventuality occurred, the welfare people would take away his children and place them in foster homes, since he could no longer provide for them.

When John saw the ad for *Ask the Prophet*, he immediately believed this was an omen his prayers would be answered. He had always been a devout Christian. His father, who had been a minister for more than fifty years, told him Jesus and the Holy Father had visited him on several occasions. He implied he had a personal relationship with them in times of strife. His grandfather, also a minister, had told him similar stories of visitations by Jesus. Although John had not been blessed like his dad and grandfather, he knew they would never lie to him. He believed with all his heart his faith would always be free of any doubt or reservation.

When John learned he would be the first contestant to go for the five million dollar prize, he considered himself the most fortunate and happiest man on the planet. God had looked down and blessed his family with his bounty. His wife and his ten children were also convinced their troubles would soon be over. All John had to do was to declare there was life

after death, which had always been a no brainer to him.

As the time of the broadcast approached, the media tried to chip away at John's beliefs. Several pertinent questions also arose in the news and various talk shows. Even if the mysterious prophet could answer any question about the past or the future, did he really know the truth about God's plan for his people in terms of a hereafter? Could his answer be wrong, and should John Smith put his life on the line on what the prophet said he knew. What he believed and why he believed it remained a guarded secret. The answer was in a sealed envelope inside a vault, and Tibor, the prophet from the time of Christ, was sequestered and would have no contact with anyone other than Wellington until the broadcast was over.

In addition to the conjecture about Tibor's beliefs and motivations, many atheists interviewed on TV shows, such as Letterman, Leno, and Conan, disputed the existence of any God or the possibility of heaven.

Mail and emails deluged John and his family. Crowds of people stood outside on the sidewalk shouting opinions about God, religion and the hereafter. Wellington had to place armed guards around the perimeter of their home to keep both believers and naysayers at a safe distance. Ignoring the relentless negative onslaught, the family remained unshakable and steadfast in their beliefs. They believed God was in heaven and would not let anything harm them. They also believed the prophet from the time of Jesus was a messenger of God sent to end their suffering. It didn't matter what the atheists and skeptics thought; their voices had always been there, trying to undermine what his family had so steadfastly believed.

Finally, the night of the telecast arrived. New York City had become a media circus. The first moon shot, all the super bowls, all the World Series, Elvis' broadcast from Hawaii, and every other televised event paled in comparison to *Ask the Prophet*. The world had tuned in to see the results that would answer the question of the ages.

The show began, and the emcee, Don Galloway, introduced Tibor and a panel of news commentators and

clergymen who had interrogated him with a long list of questions relating to the past and future. They acknowledged that every answer he'd given was correct.

A documentary followed, addressing the trials and tribulations of the Smith family. Slides of their small bungalow, their involvement with the church, and the history of John's father and grandfather's ministries showed the world the past life of the man who would soon risk his life for the unprecedented prize of five million dollars.

Finally, the curtain rose on a massive throne-like chair behind a raised metal platform, referred to in commercials as the command center in the middle of the stage. Two men led John to it, and he took a seat. The men applied leather straps to his head, arms, and legs, similar to a man being strapped to an electric chair. From the left, two other men, dressed in green scrubs, wheeled in what looked like a jug of water, and placed next to the chair. Afterward, they placed an IV in John's arm that led from three liquid containers identified in the preliminary discussion as sodium thiopental, succinylcholine, and potassium chloride.

A TV camera from above projected the question across the top of the screen, "Is there life after death?" Below the question, the heads of one red button and one black button protruded from the plane of the command center. Under the red button was the word "yes" and under the black, the word "no." Only John's right arm below the elbow had been left unsecured from the leather straps that bound him. This allowed his right hand to access to the buttons on the command center.

There was a drum roll, and Don Galloway said in a solemn voice off camera, "John Smith, have you read the rules of the contest, and do you understand your life will be forfeited if you answer the question, "Is there life after death?" incorrectly."

John said, "Yes, I have read the rules, and I understand the consequences of the action I am about to take." Beads of sweat rolled down his face as the cameras panned in.

"If you answer the question correctly, you will be awarded the sum of five million dollars."

Clearing his throat, but still unwavering, he replied, "I understand."

This will be your last opportunity to step down and let the next challenger take your place before we proceed. Do you want to continue?"

"Yes." John said firmly, staring into the camera.

"Tibor, the prophet summoned by a time machine has entered the secret answer to this timeless question into our computer. Are you willing to accept his answer and live or die by its consequences?"

"Yes, I am," he said without reservation.

"I must caution all those watching this program that what follows should only be viewed by mature audiences. This is the first public execution ever televised on American TV. This is not a mock demonstration, but an actual prime time event and is live at this moment. John Smith on the count of ten, please push yes or no.

The amplification of the drum roll increased to a heart pounding crescendo as the announcer counted down with a deliberate slowness that made each person watching in the audience and in the rest of the world grimace with maddening anticipation, "Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two..."

Suddenly a shrill agitated cry rang out from off-camera, "Stop! Don't push the button!" The announcer stopped counting with one number to go. The prophet lurched on to the main set, and throwing his hands into the air screamed, "Don't push the button! Wellington has had the numbers reversed! The powers that be have paid dearly to sabotage the integrity of this broadcast!"

Three men in black suits sprang on to the stage toward the ancient, white-bearded man in his long, flowing robe as he bounded toward the command center. Thrusting himself in front of John, he desperately tried to reach the black button. Millions of viewers from all over the world witnessed his fingers struggling to reach this single button when the three men grabbed him and carried him away screaming.

The face of the emcee filled the screen and, without the slightest sign of being flustered, he said with all of his pearly

teeth gleaming, “We’ll be right back after these announcements.”

After the commercials, the broadcast opened with Wellington sitting at an enormous executive desk. Looking completely presidential, he announced, “It is my duty to report that Tibor, the prophet from the time of Christ, has suffered a breakdown and is on his way to the emergency room at Presbyterian Hospital for further evaluation. He is currently in stable condition. We are hopeful he will have a complete recovery.” Lifting his eyes from the printed page on his desk, Wellington looked into the camera with all the sincerity and integrity he could muster and said with presidential assertiveness, “I assure you that what you are about to see is based exactly on Tibor’s answer to the question, “is there life after death?” A host of outside engineers and consultants have tested the red and black buttons on the command center as to their precise accuracy and functionality.”

Taking a drink from a glass of water, the billionaire continued, “Pushing the red button means yes- there is life after death. Pushing the black button means no- there is no life after death. Without further ado, we will begin the countdown from the beginning. Take it away, Don Galloway.”

The camera returned to John Smith in the enormous ironclad chair at a raised platform with one red button and one black button. Galloway’s voice boomed from off camera, “Thank you, Mr. Wellington. John, are you ready for me to start the countdown from the beginning.”

John closed his eyes and thought about what had just happened. Selecting the button based on his unyielding faith was no longer the only issue. Now the question had become, “Is the prophet telling the truth or Wellington. Had the numbers been reversed? Should he now push the black button and not the red?”

“John, I hate to rush you, with the most critical decision you will ever make in your life, but we have less than five minutes of air time. Are you ready for me to begin the countdown?”

John swallowed hard and said, “I’m ready.”

Don Galloway started counting down slowly, pausing

between each number for the maximum audience anticipation as the music increased in intensity, "Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one.... Make your selection."

John took the leap of faith God told him was correct. He pushed the button and became a multimillionaire as balloons and confetti flooded the stage, and the production credits started to roll.



Creep

Homer felt most comfortable lurking in the shadows at night. He liked watching women from a distance when they didn't know he was there. When he found one who appealed to him, mostly tall blondes, he would follow them to find out where they lived and note it in his little black book. Every day after work, he would decide which one of the girls he would choose for the night.

Homer wasn't a threatening sort, and he meant the women no harm. He'd just park on the street in his gray Dodge and wait for his selection for the evening to come home. When she finally arrived and went inside, he'd pull out his binoculars and canvass the windows of the house or

apartment, hoping to get a glimpse of her undressing. Sometimes, a bare boob would give him an extra thrill.

Sitting for hours in his car, waiting for the female to come home, was extremely frustrating, but Homer had nothing else to do with his life. Before he started creeping, and sometimes peeping, if he got lucky, his monotonous routine had taken him to the edge of a mental breakdown.

During the day, he was the janitor at Mountain High School where he had graduated at the bottom of his class eight years before. The job didn't pay well, but he loved ogling young girls shaking their booties as they walked by while he mopped the floors.

Homer had always been forgettable; no one paid him any mind. He wasn't ugly; he was simply plain and unremarkable. He wasn't tall or short; he was of average height. He had always been painfully shy, and rarely spoke to anyone, man or woman.

Then one fateful day, his life changed forever. While mopping up an accidental spill, he saw two beautiful long legs pass by him. A scent of angelic perfume hung in the air before the acrid smell of the floor cleaner overpowered it. The young teen veered away, trying to avoid the arc of his long handled mop, but one strand slopped upon her white tennis shoe. Immediately he said, "I'm sorry, miss, I didn't see you until it was too late."

She turned and looked at him with a concerned expression and said in the kindest voice he'd ever heard, "It was my fault." Her innocent smile made his whole body tingle. "I was daydreaming and not watching where I was going. I'm so sorry."

He stood there in awe, staring into her beautiful brown eyes until the amount of time that had elapsed became embarrassing. Finally, he blushed, and sliding his bucket toward the bank of lockers lining both sides of the hall, returned to mopping the floor.

As the young girl walked away, Homer furtively raised his eyes and watched her without moving his head. Her beauty sent shock waves through his body. She was more striking than anyone he'd seen before. In a split second, he'd

fallen hopelessly in love.

That afternoon when the students left for the day, all he could think of was finding out her name and where she lived. Removing his black book from his pocket, he ripped out all the pages, then discarded them into a nearby shredder. He was no longer interested in stalking anyone other than the goddess he had come upon that day. His heart belonged to her and no one else until the end of time.

A week passed, and he hadn't seen her again. He walked about like a zombie, dejected and forlorn, fearing his beloved had been a visitor at the school, and he would never see her again. Then, the wonderful day came when he saw her talking with two other girls in the cafeteria.

He continued mopping and sweeping longer than necessary until she finished eating and left with her friends. Homer stowed the cleaning supplies in the first storage closet he came to and followed them down the hall at a distance. When the two girls separated from his beauty queen, he watched her go to her locker and take out a textbook for her next class. After she left, he went there and made a mental note of the number.

When school finished for the day, Homer waited outside behind some shrubbery. His face lit up when he watched her leave the building, but the elation quickly faded when she got into a yellow convertible driven by an athletic looking Adonis with long, flowing, blond hair. When he saw the driver kissing her passionately before he pulled into traffic, Homer's face reddened with a rage he had never felt before. The only woman he could ever love was in the clutches of not only another man, but a muscle bound sex maniac with a fancy car. His outrage was unbearable.

That night, Homer went to the school library and found a copy of the latest high school yearbook on one of the shelves.

Sitting at a table, he started leafing through the pages until he found the handsome young man who drove the convertible. His name was Jess Upperman. His perfect white teeth and his football jacket with the letter he wore in the picture sent him into a frenzy of jealousy. Clinching his imperfect teeth, he angrily pounded the table until his fingers

started to bleed.

Next, he found the photo of his goddess. Her name was Scarlett Mackenzie. His heart pounded in his chest as he tore the page with her picture from the yearbook. Taking a large book from an adjacent shelf, he placed her photo delicately between the pages for safekeeping until he got back to his apartment. Returning to the yearbook, he looked at the sport's section. Just as he'd thought, Upperman was the star quarterback of the football team. Taking a ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket, Homer scratched out his perfect face until it shredded the paper.

Later that night, after cleaning the administrative offices, he located the key to the student files in the secret place he'd seen Mrs. Franklin put it countless times. Unlocking the cabinet, he rifled the folders until he found the files for Mackenzie and Upperman. He jotted down the pertinent information he would need to secure his role as Scarlett's secret lover and eternal protector.

After completing his cleaning duties, he drove to the local Wal-Mart and purchased a stainless steel claw hammer. He had an eerie feeling he would need it soon.

Pulling out his notes, he entered Scarlett's address in his GPS and drove three miles to her house on Evergreen Street. He parked in a secluded spot under an elm tree a short distance from the white frame house and settled in for the night.

He grimaced when he saw the light in an upstairs bedroom come on with two silhouettes groping each other behind the window shade. Locked in an embrace, the taller shadow lifted the smaller one and thrust it against the window seat. Homer pounded on the steering wheel and tried to stifle a scream, watching in agony as the larger shadow relentlessly pushed the smaller shadow against the window shade again and again. After it seemed two eternities had elapsed, the silhouettes disappeared below the edge of the windowsill.

Homer sat in the car with tears and snot running down his face. He thought his heart would explode when his blood boiled with unbridled hatred.

An hour later, he saw Upperman climb out of a window

on the first floor and drop down to the lawn that surrounded the frame house that was now totally dark. The figure stayed in the cover of the trees until he stepped onto the sidewalk, unlocked his convertible, and got in. Homer saw the flame of a cigarette lighting when the car pulled into the street and sped away. Without hesitation, he turned the Dodge around and followed Upperman at a safe distance.

A few miles later, the convertible pulled into a gas station. After filling up at the pump, Scarlett's lover headed for the restrooms situated on the right side of the service station.

Homer pulled the Dodge along side the men's room, jumped out of his car, and stood outside the door waiting with his Wal-Mart purchase at the ready. When Upperman stepped into the parking lot, Homer hit him in the center of the forehead with the claw hammer and dragged him into the men's room. The claw came down again and again with all the fury he could muster. When he finished with Upperman, he was not only missing all of his perfect teeth, he no longer had a face. After the relentless gouging, Homer had hammered his head so flat, it looked as if a steamroller had run over it.

The next morning before starting work, Homer stopped for a coffee and donut and bought the morning paper. As he expected, the brutal murder of the popular, high school football player covered the front page of the local paper. The police had no suspects, and the paper stated Upperman had been an excellent student, and none of his classmates knew of anyone who would want to harm him.

In the days that followed, Homer erected a shrine in his apartment for Scarlett with the picture he had taken from the library as the centerpiece. Sometimes he would sit for hours and stare at the picture, mesmerized by the perfection of her angelic face.

When he'd rifled the files in the office, he'd come upon the combination to Scarlett's locker. Each night after completing his chores, he opened her locker and inspected the things inside. Sometimes, he found articles of clothing, and once to his delight, there was a duffle bag with three sets of underwear, one of which, he took home. It was like heaven to fondle her panties and drape them over his face. The scent

of her sweet perfume took his breath away.

A week later, after Homer had pulled into his usual parking spot under the elm tree, a maroon mustang parked in front of Scarlett's house caused his temperature to rise. The house was dark, and the street quiet as a tomb when he started his vigil for the night. He surveyed the windows at the front of the house through the binoculars he'd taken from the glove box. Then he noticed the aura of a TV playing in one of the downstairs rooms toward the back of the house. He left his car and stealthily moved into the shelter of the trees and shrubs around the back yard and crawled under the window where the TV was playing. The window shade was up, and he could see *American Idol* playing on the panoramic screen. One of the contestants sang a pop ballad while the crowd and the judges looked on. Raising his head to see the floor, he peeked inside with only his left eye breaking the plane of the windowsill.

On the carpet in front of Ryan Seacrest's broad smile, he saw the nude buttocks of a muscular man, writhing atop the love of his life who undulated in a sexual frenzy beneath him. Homer turned away in disgust and threw up into the shrubbery when he realized Scarlett's new lover was Ron Lockhart, a junior who had helped him with special janitorial projects from time to time. He returned to his Dodge and sped away, sobbing uncontrollably. He saw a flashing neon cocktail glass and pulled into a parking space in front of a shabby restaurant and bar. He went inside and drank double shots of tequila until he achieved unconsciousness.

When he awoke the next morning, he found himself in his car in the restaurant parking lot. He had a migraine headache from the enormous quantity of Cuervo he'd drunk before passing out. Someone had taped a note to the steering wheel saying he could retrieve his keys from the cashier inside. Homer called the high school on his cell and informed them he would be late.

During the lunch hour, he called Lockhart and asked if he wanted to make some extra money that night waxing the gymnasium floor. Lockhart was more than happy to comply. He always needed money.

At nine p.m., they met in the gym. Homer had a cart full of cleaning supplies and a buffer. After a little small talk, he said, "I sure am lonely these days. I wish I could find a girl and get married. Are you dating anyone?"

Homer saw Lockhart look at him quizzically after that remark. They had spoken before about baseball, high school gossip, and the pitiful wages Mountain High paid, but never about girls. However, Lockhart took the bait and replied, "Dating? I never thought much about dating. When someone named Mary calls, I don't know which Mary it is. This gets me in trouble sometimes, but I work it out with them when I get them in the sack."

"When would you consider tying the knot with someone special?" Homer's ears pricked for the answer.

"Ain't got no desire to get married anytime soon. I'm too young for that bullshit. Maybe in twenty or thirty years, when I'm bald and have a beer belly the size of Texas, I might think about it, but not now. Why settle for one piece of ass, when you can sample the litter?"

Lockhart's words were like salt in an open wound, but Homer shrugged it off. "It's easy for you to say; you attract girls like flies on shit; I just want one I can fall in love with."

Lockhart stopped buffing and nodded, "Yeah, Homer, I've always had a way with girls, but take my advice, don't fall for the first one who comes along. Experiment. Most of them don't have a clue how to please us; they just lie there like a bump on a log and let us do all the work. But ooo la la, the one I had last night was a real tiger. She fucked my brains loose and wouldn't stop. What a nympho," he boasted.

"A nympho?" Homer's hands began to shake with anger, and he squeezed the handle of the hammer behind his back in a death grip.

"What I mean is the girl I was humping last night, I think her name was Scarlett, had one orgasm after another. I was raw when I finally rolled off her. I couldn't believe it when she begged me not to stop. One man could never satisfy someone like her. Somebody told me she's taken on the entire football team after some of the home games. In fact, there's a game this Saturday. If you can find a helmet and some shoulder

pads, go down where the picnic tables are at North River. Maybe she can show you a thing or two. You might get the clap, but what the hell. You need experience.”

The claw hammer took out Lockhart’s right eye. His brains and gore splattered the newly waxed floor, and he toppled over with a big surprised look on what remained of his face. Homer extracted several industrial sized garbage bags from his cart and spreading them out, rolled Lockhart’s body onto them to collect the pooling blood. Placing a towel, under his head, he hit him ten more times, but controlled each blow to avoid damaging the floor. Afterward, he dragged the corpse through the men’s locker room, then into the showers and turned the water on Lockhart’s pulverized head. Blood started flowing into the drain.

Homer returned and mopped up the trail of blood across the gymnasium floor, reapplied some wax, and buffed the floor into a sheen that bore no trace of the murder that had just transpired only moments before.

After cleaning up the locker room and the showers, he wrapped the body in more garbage bags and hauled it out in a trash bin to the trunk of his car. Five minutes later, he tossed the remains in a remote corner of the landfill where he dumped the school’s garbage each day.

Homer realized he had let his emotions get the better of him, and he knew the police would be questioning everyone, including him, about Lockhart’s disappearance, the same as they had for Upperman. He worried about his purchasing the hammer at Wal-Mart. He’d paid cash, but he wondered if the clerk would remember him. It was water over the dam now, if he did remember, but he could no longer control himself. His love for Scarlett was all that mattered. He would give his life to protect her from the sex maniacs that roamed the halls of Mountain High School.

On Saturday afternoon, he sat on a picnic table and watched twenty-five football players go into a tent and have their way with his beloved. Lockhart was right. It appeared Scarlett enjoyed every moment of the atrocities thrust upon her. Most of the players were laughing their asses off at her expense when they headed up the hill toward the empty

stadium.

When Homer arose from his ringside seat on the picnic table, he was surprised when Scarlett suddenly noticed him for the first time. She apparently thought he was another member of the football team since he wore a helmet and a jersey, complete with shoulder pads. She looked exhausted, but asked if he wanted to do her before she packed up her tent and took off.

He shook his head and headed back to where he'd parked his car. Scarlett had seen him, but none of the players had noticed him at all. Even though, every player had known he was not a member of the team, no one questioned why he'd put on a Mountain football uniform. He was there, and yet, he was invisible. That's the way it had been all his life. Tears rolled down his face as he picked a handout from a trashcan next to the bleachers. It listed the names and positions of every player on the team.

That night, after completing his chores, Homer unlocked the student files in the administrative offices and wrote down the address of each football player on the team.

The next night, Jake Terrell, tight end for the Mountaineers, pulled his Impala into his driveway. It was after midnight, the neighborhood was silent, and no lights shone anywhere on the dark street. When Jake approached the side entrance of his house and pulled out his key to unlock the door, Homer stepped from the shadows and hit him in his right temple with the claw end of the hammer as hard as he could. It was in so deep, Homer had to stand on Jake's shoulders with both feet and jump up and down to dislodge it. When he finally got it free, he hit him ten more times to prove his eternal love for Scarlett.

Returning to his car, Homer smiled his imperfect smile and crossed the first name from the list.



The Box With Red And Blue Ribbons

The cloaked, hump-backed man slipped unnoticed through the hustle and bustle of busy Christmas shoppers. With his hat pulled low over his face, he gripped something hidden beneath his bulky woolen coat. His beady eyes flitted back and forth beneath his scarf and mugger's hat and came to rest on the counter filled with surprise packages wrapped in white paper and tied with red and blue ribbons.

Without moving his head, the man inspected his surroundings. After making sure no one was watching, he produced an identical box with red and blue ribbons from under his coat and dropped it among the others on the counter. An insidious smile wrinkled his unshaven face as he slipped into the crowd and disappeared.

Hours passed, and the continuous horde of shoppers had purchased many of the surprise packages, but toward the bottom of the stack, the box the suspicious visitor had placed on the table remained untouched. Suddenly, the hand of a small boy reached into the pile, grasped the box, and quickly jammed it under his navy blue coat. After pausing to check for onlookers, he hurried away, unnoticed by the other shoppers.

and the sales clerks.

After leaving the store, the twelve-year-old boy named Joey, zigzagged between the shoppers on 34th street, and finally veered into a familiar alleyway not far from where he lived. All the way home, he looked back to see if someone was following him. A tear rolled down his cheek as he thought of the sin he'd committed by stealing the package. He was ashamed, but he'd had no choice. He had no money for the present he wanted to give his grandmother for Christmas. Someday when he was older, he would return the price of the gift to the department store to cleanse his soul.

The dreary ruins of the tenement building loomed into view as he drew closer to home. The red brick structure had many broken windows, and numerous fire escapes hung askew across the exterior facade of the eight-story walkup.

Joey bounded up the stairs to the second floor to the last door at the end of the hall where he lived with his grandmother, Adele. He unlocked the door as quietly as he could and eased inside the small apartment.

There were only a few sticks of furniture in the living room and two dismal pictures on the wall that had seen better days. His grandmother had no money in her meager budget for Christmas decorations. The room, regardless of the season, was the same as it was any other day. The walls were dim and bare and needed a fresh coat of paint, but it was warm compared to the bitter cold outside. Despite the lack of holiday cheer, it felt good to Joey since it was the only home he'd ever known.

He hung up his coat in the closet to keep his grandmother from feeling the package that was hanging inside the lining on a string. Adele was darning a sock in her rocking chair. She greeted him with an adoring smile, and he threw his arms around her and hugged her tenderly.

Despite only having a small social security check as her only income, Adele, who was eighty-one, had taken Joey in as a two year old when her unwed daughter died in an automobile accident. She had very little to give the child, but she gave him all she had. Some months, they ran out of money before they ran out of month and had to eat bread and

water for a few days. Adele always thought of Joey's welfare before her own and often went to bed hungry to let the boy have the little food they had. He was young, but he understood the sacrifices she'd made for him, and he loved her very much.

After she had gone to bed that evening, he sneaked the present from his coat and hid it in a secret place.

* * *

The days passed, and Christmas Eve finally came. Adele watched the sun disappear through the window, and the streetlights illuminate. She'd sent Joey on an errand, and he hadn't returned. As the time crawled slowly by, her eyes remained riveted on the old battered clock with the broken face as it moved relentlessly past her bedtime. She couldn't understand where Joey could be.

More time passed. It was twenty-three minutes to ten. The boy had never been out so late. The floor squeaked as she rocked back and forth in her rocking chair.

She heard the sound of heavy footsteps in the lobby and someone's heavy tread climbing the stairs to the second floor. She knew the footsteps weren't Joey's, and now they had reached the landing of the long hallway to her door. She'd had no visitors in two years. The only explanation she could think of sent her into a state of panic. Someone had come to tell her something bad had happened to Joey.

Every step down the hall to her door made the fear more of a reality. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she found it hard to catch her breath. Her only thought was that Joey was dead. Her heart beat faster and faster until an excruciating pain swept over her. Abruptly she staggered from her rocking chair, gasped, and slumped to the floor. As she lay there trying to catch a final breath, she saw the box with red and blue ribbons pushed back under the sofa. Her fingers reached out and clutched the blue ribbon and pulled it toward her. She heard the footsteps stop outside the door. Her heart stopped just as the sound of a key turned the bolt in the lock.

"Grandma! Grandma! Look at the boots I found in the alley. They're almost new and..." Joey shouted joyfully. His

eyes fell on his grandmother's body lying on the floor. Throwing down his old sneakers, he fell to his knees by her side and started to cry. Her open eyes stared blankly into space as he tried and tried to revive her. Finally, deciding to go for help, he ran down the stairs to the apartment on the first floor. The lady who lived there dialed 911 while her husband ran up the stairs with Joey. Rushing into the apartment, the man found the old woman dead on the floor. The boy returned to her side and sobbed uncontrollably.

Shortly thereafter, Joey heard the sound of other footsteps on the stairs and several men talking loudly. They entered the room and started to check his grandmother's vital signs. Several women who lived downstairs ushered him away from the body. They did their best to console him, but the loss was unbearable.

As he left the apartment for the last time, he saw the policeman drape a green woolen blanket over his grandmother's body and the box with red and blue ribbons.

A few days passed, and the apartment where Adele and Joey lived was empty. Without the furniture, the discolorations on the walls were even more pronounced.

Outside in a heap of garbage, the leg of their old rocking chair protruded from the pile. The old battered clock that would never tick again and the leg of the end table lay beside two ribbons, one red and one blue.. A partially crushed white box with coffee grounds heaped on one side stood on top of the heap. The ribbons were gone, but the top was still in place.

The wind lapped at the paper in the pile and pieces of cardboard fluttered off on the breeze. A tired old dog and several cats searched the garbage for food. One of the cats bared his teeth at the old dog causing it to run headlong into the box, which sent it flying down the side of the pile. The top flew off exposing stacks of one hundred dollar bills, crisp and green, that burst like confetti into the air atop the mountainous heap of garbage. A sudden gust of winter wind swept through the alleyway, and one by one the bills sailed into the updraft between the two tenement buildings. Another blast of air lifted them high into the sky, and after reaching their maximum

height; they began to fall like snowflakes onto the dreary sidewalks in the early dawn.

For those who found one or more of the hundred dollar bills, it was the best Christmas they could remember. For some, it was a room and a bath. For others, it was a respite from the soup kitchen on Christmas day. Some of the bills became donations for the local Catholic Church needing new books for their school. Somehow the wind had distributed the bills to so many people on tenement row who needed a little cheer that day.

Joey didn't share in the wind's distribution of the hundred dollar bills, but he later found a wonderful home with a married couple that had always wanted a child to love. When he received his first paycheck as an employee of MacDonald's, he mailed the department store an anonymous envelope with a note of explanation and a crisp ten-dollar bill, which had been the cost of the box with red and blue ribbons.

From his Park Avenue apartment, the hump-backed billionaire looked down on the busy streets of Manhattan. He wondered if any of his eccentric gifts had made a difference in somebody's life.

He smiled and drank some coffee and wondered what he would do next year for Christmas. He jotted down some possibilities as it started to snow.



The Face

The fear was over. was just a matter of time. Harry remembered the wonderful years when he was rich and made love almost nightly with some of the most beautiful women in the world. He thought of Rome. Venice. The South of France. Manhattan. So many fabulous evenings dining in the best restaurants. He suddenly had the overpowering urge for a dry Grey Goose martini. The rain peppered the standing water outside the hut. Beads of perspiration welled on his forehead.

Memories returned...

His mother and father had promoted his success starring in countless television and magazine ads from the time he was six years old until the fateful year he became twenty-five. Mirrors adorned every wall of his house. He was the quintessential media face for all the large corporate ad campaigns. Several of the top studios wanted to sign him for an acting career, and he had been holding out for the best offer when it happened.

Fame and fortune had not come without sacrifices. He had never known a normal childhood. During adolescence when chicken pox had threatened his beautiful face, his

mother had bandaged his hands to stop him from picking at the sores, preventing any chance of a lifetime scar. He was forbidden to participate in any form of sports activity as a teen or even now as an adult due to the insurance. He'd been educated at home from kindergarten through college to ensure that his face would remain flawless for his commercials. The way he dressed, the car he drove, and his movie star looks attracted members of the opposite sex like bees to honey, and yet he remained a virgin until he was twenty-one years old.

He had been a success in every way and had become a multimillionaire under twenty-five. Lloyds of London insured his face for thirty million dollars. He had a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. His beautiful face and body had adorned the covers of every fashion magazine at one time or another, but his favorite cover was for Money magazine when he was photographed standing beside a bevy of starlets on his hundred-foot yacht smoking a big Cuban cigar.

He could have had almost any woman on the planet, but he had a serious fetish for kinky sex, particularly with foreign beauties. He was fluent in eight languages, which came in handy when he dated abroad.

Life was filled with obscene extravagances and countless amorous conquests. The world was his oyster until one fateful night in Madrid.

The buxom Italian starlet he had picked for that night's pleasure was very wealthy and, unlike most of the other female selections, had a mind of her own.

She was not into oral sex, and when propositioned to satisfy the whim of the spoiled millionaire playboy, she balked and was insulted by the proposal. After calling her a worthless bitch, she started a flurry of her own name-calling. Harry's knee-jerk reaction to her verbal retaliation led to a hard slap across her mouth, which caused a split lip and a chipped front tooth.

The raven-haired beauty immediately took a vicious swipe at his face with her long nails. His eyes were wild as he pinned her arms and glared at her with the fury of a madman. He ended her screams with a brandy bottle across her temple.

Not once, but ten times he battered her beautiful face into a bloody pulp.

His stature in life, her family tree, the prospect of imprisonment, and the loss of fortune meant nothing to him at that moment. The only thing he was concerned with was attending to his precious face. Tears rolled down his cheek and mixed with the blood from the three-finger tear across his right cheek.

The body of a young woman was found a few weeks later floating facedown in the muck that seeped into and around the city dump. The huge rats that made their home in this part of the city had devoured a large portion of the beautiful brunette. The remains that lay on the cold slab in the morgue were a pile of unrecognizable flesh with no means of identification. The only thing that was changed about Harry was the temporary bandage on his cheek and the floor mats in the trunk of his Mercedes that had to be replaced.

Harry's face was slightly marred from the incident, but it was nothing a little makeup could not hide. His reputation remained intact since no one knew that he was the last person who had been with the missing starlet and she had not been identified as the rat-eaten floater.

He tried to take a little time off from his sexual escapades, but the desire for kinky sex could not be quenched no matter how much he masturbated.

Then came the night Harry had imbibed in too many martinis and had a nightcap of grappa. His attaché had bribed the nightclub owner to supply a room for him to sleep it off since his master suite was across town and he had been throwing up repeatedly. Sometime during the night while Harry was snoring loudly and finally resting comfortably, the door of his room opened and a dark-eyed, sullen beauty slid into his bed and mounted him.

Harry awoke the next morning warm and satisfied. He felt the woman's hand on his shoulder, and he began stroking it and babbling to himself as he started to wake up from the long night of lovemaking and intoxication. Dazed and disoriented, he lifted his weary lids and feasted his eyes on the exquisite face of the young Italian woman still asleep in his

arms. She was very beautiful. Her hair was flowing ebony. Her rosy complexion and soft mouth that sparkled with beautiful teeth convinced him that his attaché had truly done well in selecting his companion for the evening.

The only mar from perfection was a peculiar chaffing upon her cheek. He had no idea what kind of compensation she expected for the night's pleasures, which he did not remember at all, but after dressing and grooming himself, he took a few hundreds from his wallet and started to put them in her hand. It was then he noticed four partially eaten fingers protruding from the bed linen. He pulled away the sheet and saw that all but her face was riddled with sores and decaying flesh. He gasped for breath as the word stuck in his throat and caused him to swallow hard.

"No!" he cried. "God, no!"

The rain had stopped, and time had returned to the present. He no longer thought about his face. It was a mesh of bandages. He never looked in a mirror. He wept whenever he recalled that day about a month before when a pool of clear water revealed for the last time the remnants of his beautiful face. The woman that shared his bed that night had not been solicited by his attaché. No one knew where she had come from or where she had gone afterward.

Time was all he had left. He must return to his hut. His walk was over. It saddened him that the walk was so short, but there was nowhere else to go in the leper colony.

About Billy Wells

Thanks for reading my book. I hope you enjoyed it.

As a boy, I read a story entitled The October Game by Ray Bradbury in an Alfred Hitchcock anthology paperback. That story not only chilled me to the bone, but it inspired me to write horror stories of my own. I submitted one of my early attempts, Black As Night, to Ruth Tisinger, my high school English teacher. Knowing she hated scary stories and would be grading it for the next day's class at night, I included the following note at the end of the story for additional effect, "Now, Mrs. Tisinger, as you sit streaking my paper with scarlet, someone could be watching you through the window. Are you alone?"

From those humble beginnings, I have written 137 short stories, mostly horror, with surprise endings. I've just published my eighth collection, Dead Things. I've seen more movies than anyone I've ever known and enjoy most genres, but a good horror film has always been my favorite. My dream would be to see some of the stories in this book in a movie or a TV show.

Reviews In Today's World

In the past, when everyone knew everyone else in their neighborhood, people used to share information about the good and bad things they discovered to help each other in their day-to-day living.

Now, in this global village where we are in touch with everyone and everything in nanoseconds, Amazon monitors what readers say about what they read in order to distinguish the good from the bad.

Since reviews are the life's blood of today's authors, and we depend on them more than ever before, I would sincerely appreciate it if you would place a review of this book on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). It does not have to be long; only a minimum of twenty words is required.

If you place a review on whatever site you bought my book, I will hold you in high regard for all eternity, and I may include you in my will.

Other Books by Billy Wells

Don't Look Behind You: A Collection of Horror

Billy Wells Horror Anthology I

Black As Night

Shivers & Other Nightmares

In Your Face Horror

Thrillers & Chillers

Thrillers & Chillers 2

Something In the Dark and Other Nightmares

Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 1

Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 2

Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 3

Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 4

Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 5

Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 6

Singles

It Lurks On the Mountain

The Tomb

Cold Calls

The Caller From Hell

Forbidden Fruit

The Reckoning (From Scary Stories- Vol. 2)

Crawlspace (From Scary Stories 4)

Links to Billy Wells Sites:

[billywellshorror.com home page](http://billywellshorror.com)

[Billy Wells Horror Pinterest](#)

[Billy Wells Coffeesmoke You Tube Channel](#)

[Billy Wells Author's Den Page](#)